

Fashion influencers on Instagram as digital media entrepreneurs – online identity work as a business model?

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Abstract

What might have started out as a social network for individuals eager to share photographs with friends evolved into a platform no longer used for private purposes only – the talk is of Instagram. One phenomenon standing out on the app are fashion influencers who actively construct a version of themselves that is presentable and makes sense for their entrepreneurial endeavors within fashion marketing on Instagram. This construction of self is known in an academic context as *identity work*. So far, there are no studies focusing on the specific area of fashion influencers on Instagram while at the same time taking identity work as a factor for success into consideration. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the following research question: *To what extent do fashion influencers on Instagram make use of identity work in order to become more successful entrepreneurs?*

In order to answer the underlying research question, the research examines female influencers in the fashion sector on Instagram. Data is gathered from a total of 10 qualitative interviews with German women who are fashion content creators on Instagram. Afterwards, the data from the in-depth interviews is examined and systematically analyzed. From the qualitative analysis and interpretation of the findings, four core themes emerged: First there is the *authentic presentation of self on Instagram*, comprising the extent to which authenticity and trustworthiness are of importance for influencers' success on Instagram. Second, the theme *storytelling and image* reveals that adapting their identities is not naturally the intention of bloggers, however carefully considered content sharing and storytelling form their image on the platform. The third finding addresses the *construction of identity in a social network*, emphasizing the role of the online community and their feedback. Finally, the fourth theme emerging from the analysis considers the role of *Instagram as a gate opener*, broaching the issue of the respondents not necessarily identifying as entrepreneurs but nevertheless being successful.

It has been found that respondents to this research make a significant use of identity work in order to become successful on Instagram, by either maintaining their identity through authentic presentation of self or by forming their identity through storytelling and positioning. When constructing an identity in a social network, the role of the community is significant. Furthermore, it was found that while the respondents for the most part did not identify as entrepreneurs, presenting one's self on Instagram works as a gate opener into the professional (fashion) world and is thus still successful.

Further research should focus on the international scope of the phenomenon under study and take into account factors that could have an impact on identity as an influencer, such as monetary rewards or the size of the community.

KEYWORDS: *Digital Media Entrepreneurship/ Identity Work/ Self-branding/ Instagram/ Fashion Influencers*

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction..... | 4 |
| 2. Theoretical framework..... | 7 |
| 2.1 Entrepreneurial and creative identities..... | 7 |
| 2.1.1 Entrepreneurial identity..... | 7 |
| 2.1.2 Creative entrepreneurs and their identity struggles..... | 8 |
| 2.2 The construction of an entrepreneurial identity..... | 9 |
| 2.2.1 Identity work..... | 9 |
| 2.2.2 (Self)-branding, positioning and storytelling..... | 10 |
| 2.3 The business of fashion blogging..... | 12 |
| 2.3.1 History of fashion blog(ger)s..... | 13 |
| 2.3.2 From bloggers to influencers..... | 14 |
| 2.4 Influencers on Instagram and their relevance for the fashion industry..... | 15 |
| 2.4.1 Instagram – from snapshots to best shot..... | 15 |
| 2.4.2 Influencers as a business model for fashion companies..... | 16 |
| 2.5 Summary - From Entrepreneurs to Fashion Influencers on Instagram..... | 17 |
| 3. Method..... | 18 |
| 3.1 Choice of a qualitative methodology..... | 18 |
| 3.2 Sampling..... | 19 |
| 3.2.1 Sampling method..... | 19 |
| 3.2.2 Research participants..... | 20 |
| 3.3 Data collection..... | 21 |
| 3.4 Operationalization..... | 21 |
| 3.4.1 Entrepreneurship & identity..... | 22 |
| 3.4.2 Identity work..... | 23 |
| 3.5 Methods of analysis..... | 23 |
| 3.6 Quality criteria..... | 28 |
| 3.6.1 Validity and reliability..... | 28 |
| 3.6.2 Research ethics..... | 29 |
| 4. Findings..... | 30 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.1 General findings | 30 |
| 4.2 The true you – authentic presentation of self on Instagram? | 32 |
| 4.3 Can I post this? – Storytelling and image | 33 |
| 4.3.1 Storytelling | 33 |
| 4.3.2 Positioning and image..... | 34 |
| 4.3.3 Becoming a brand | 34 |
| 4.4 Construction of identity in a social network | 35 |
| 4.4.1 The role of the community | 35 |
| 4.4.1.1 The importance of engagement & networking..... | 36 |
| 4.4.1.2 The role of feedback..... | 36 |
| 4.4.2 Social environment (offline)..... | 37 |
| 4.4.3 Downsides of Instagram/ social media | 37 |
| 4.5 Instagram as a gate opener – Presentation of self as a rewarding hobby | 38 |
| 4.5.1 Working on Instagram as a reward..... | 39 |
| 4.5.2 Future on Instagram..... | 39 |
| 5. Discussion..... | 41 |
| 6. Conclusion | 52 |
| References..... | 54 |
| Appendix A..... | 61 |
| Appendix B..... | 63 |
| Appendix C..... | 65 |
| Appendix D..... | 66 |
| Appendix E | 69 |
| Appendix F | 74 |

1. Introduction

„You still can't download a dress, but Instagram has fundamentally rewired the industry, replacing print magazines as the primary way in which people discover fashion" (Sherman, 2018).

We are in the middle of a revolution – at least in terms of fashion marketing. Only a bit more than a decade ago, when searching for the latest fashion trends to purchase, audiences would have to look to Milan, Paris, or New York, at least however buy a fashion magazine. Today, just taking out their phone and opening one specific app will suffice for that purpose: Instagram. But how did the whole world of fashion turn from being something fancy, dazzling, and elitist into something so close, normal, and accessible? (McDowell, 2020; Sherman, 2018)

Adducing Instagram as the sole reason for this transformation would only be half the truth. In point of fact, the people making use of Instagram are of far greater importance than the app itself – or more specifically, the content-producing people of Instagram: Fashion bloggers. Formerly being 'outsiders' from the fashion industry (Findlay, 2015), those bloggers are now revolutionizing the fashion market. What might have started out as a passion for fashion from individuals who shared their love for clothing and accessories online has now – by means of the rise of social media marketing – developed into a whole new approach of fashion marketing, both making the outsiders insiders and providing them with a credible business model (Bertaglia et al., 2020).

Oftentimes presenting a likeable 'girl next door' image that makes the fashion products presented seem approachable for everybody, fashion bloggers turn into influencers that are associated with one or more brands they cooperate with. The growing importance of social media marketing and the rising number and popularity of influencers makes collaborations with the latter indispensable and a pivotal factor of a company's marketing strategy.

Therefore, fashion influencers have to constantly evolve and adapt to changing trends and to present their "Self" (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Khamis et al., 2016) to a large audience in order to be successful – which raises one central question: How is that possible without successfully constructing their identity?

The **practical relevance** of the research question lies in its' topicality: more and more fashion brands resort back to fashion influencers on Instagram for promoting their products. Since it has become a billion-dollar business (Crump, 2019), it is pivotal for industry insiders (both brands and influencers) to know which strategies in terms of influencer's identity management will succeed.

The **theoretical relevance** is high. We know that Influencers actively try to work on their self-presentation and communication about themselves on social media to convey who they are. They actively construct a version of themselves that is presentable, likeable and makes sense for their entrepreneurial trajectory. Academically, this self-presentation and active construction of who people are is called “identity work” (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018). Identity work refers to “people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1165).

Essentially, the concept of identity work is a growing academic discourse (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018). Currently, the avenues within this discourse are proliferating (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Khamis et al., 2016; van Dijck, 2013). The integration of digital media into people’s lives and the growing mediatization make the concept an excellent choice for understanding fashion influencers on Instagram. This is shown by previous studies that address fashion bloggers (on web-blogs) and self-presentation (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Khamis et al., 2016; Rocamora, 2018; Titton, 2015). However, no studies to date focus on the specific area of fashion influencers on Instagram and at the same time take identity work as a factor for success into consideration. Moreover, there might be something very specific about the nature of identity work that we can learn from this context and case, to better understand identity work in a mediatized context in general. Overall, and despite this apparent relevance for understanding how creative entrepreneurs develop and communicate about themselves in a mediatized context (Albinsson, 2018; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2018; Werthes et al., 2018), the concept of identity work has not been extensively used and studied in conjunction with fashion influencers on Instagram who pose quite a new and even bigger phenomenon.

To fill this gap, this research aims to explore the identity work of fashion influencers in the context of digital media entrepreneurship and their relevance for the fashion industry. Accordingly, this research will contribute to the already existing literature on identity work and digital media entrepreneurship by adding the perspective of fashion influencers on Instagram to it. Therefore, the general RQ is:

To what extent do fashion influencers on Instagram make use of identity work in order to become more successful entrepreneurs?

Structure

With the aim of answering the research question proposed above, firstly, a theoretical framework will be established, on which the following analysis of the conducted interviews will be based. The framework in chapter 2 will primarily focus on (entrepreneurial) identity construction and the labor of (fashion) bloggers. First, an overview over entrepreneurial and creative identities will be given. The fusion of these two identities can lead to tensions which will be discussed, followed by the approach of *identity work* (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018) suggesting that identities are a fluid concept and that an individual's identity can be constantly adapted and shaped. Following that, fashion bloggers and their relatively recent history on Instagram will be explored, accompanied by an introduction into the relevance of Instagram and fashion bloggers for the fashion industry.

The third chapter contains the methodological groundwork for this study which is executed by means of a qualitative approach. Firstly, the sampling strategy is discussed. Interviews have been conducted with 10 German female fashion bloggers who reveal insights into their daily business, their strategies and development in the fashion blogger industry and their personal experiences with being a public figure. After illustrating the operationalization of the theoretical concepts established in chapter 2, the chosen method of analysis will be explained.

Analyzing the interviews has led to several findings elucidated in chapter 4, which will grant answers to the research question and allow for a more thorough discussion of the topic under study in chapter 5. Additionally, the limitations of this study followed by recommendations for future research are presented. Lastly, a conclusion on the findings of this research will be drawn in chapter 6.

2. Theoretical framework

The following chapter provides the theoretical base of the study. Overall, the theory focuses on the construction of creative and entrepreneurial identities in the context of digital media, the approach of identity work, as well as the labor of fashion blogging and the relevance of influencers and Instagram for the fashion industry.

2.1 Entrepreneurial and creative identities

Since this research focuses on fashion bloggers being entrepreneurs, first it will be briefly introduced what entrepreneurial identity entails, especially in the context of digital and social media and how creative entrepreneurs deal with the tensions between their creative, artistic motivations and potential economic endeavors.

2.1.1 Entrepreneurial identity

Entrepreneurs are said to hold several characteristics that distinguish them from employees (Kollmann, n.d.). Amongst those are the desire for independence, a risk-taking mentality, stress resilience or innovative thinking and often a capitalist attitude (Kollmann, n.d.; Werthes et al., 2018). Creative and different (Nielsen et al., 2018) thinking is also needed in entrepreneurship when entering new, competitive markets. However, not all entrepreneurs aim for financial profit - social entrepreneurs rather aim to find solutions to societal grievances (Achleitner, n.d.).

For the scope of this research, the focus will lie on digital media entrepreneurs and their identity construction. Firstly, to put the industry of interest into context, Horst and Hitters (2020) have defined (digital) media entrepreneurship. The field of media entrepreneurship, which according to the authors entails “new products or services in the media-industry” (Horst & Hitters, 2020, p.28) such as online news-sites, has to be distinguished from the field of digital media entrepreneurship, which comprises “new products and services in any industry which are facilitated through digital media technologies” (Horst & Hitters, 2020, p.28). These can include style bloggers or social media influencers (Horst & Hitters, 2020), whose “existence” also entails the emergence of additional new business forms that have appeared due to the rise of Web 2.0 (Archer, 2019; Kraus et al., 2018), such as social media managers or influencer marketing managers.

Today, it has become unimaginable for entrepreneurs not to be on social media (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Horst et al., 2019), especially since they enable entrepreneurs to engage with audiences and customers (Horst et al., 2019). The digitalization has brought a significant shift in the way business can be conducted today, bringing in countless opportunities for

entrepreneurs and SMEs¹ (Bouwman et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2018). At the same time, the fast developing and advancing digital world requires constant adaptation to new technological prospects – regarding business models as well as the entrepreneur’s identity (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). Social media enable entrepreneurs to construct their identity, or at least construct who they want to be and how they are seen by others (Horst et al., 2019) – through the acts of creating profiles, sharing, commenting, or liking. These social media appearances furthermore help entrepreneurs and respectively their brand to position themselves and to tell a story (Salenbacher, 2016), once again allowing them to construct an entrepreneurial identity. Social networks enable entrepreneurs to interact and engage with their audiences/potential customers and receive feedback on products, thus potentially enhancing their strategies. Werthes et al. (2018) argue that interaction and communication with other entrepreneurs are pivotal for identity development, making social media an asset to establishing a distinct brand image (Kosteljik & Alsem, 2020).

The constant ‘working on identity’ in which individuals shape their identity to fit into various scenes, such as digital media platforms (Horst et al., 2019), is key to the identity work approach as discussed by several researchers (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018) and further illustrated in chapter 2.2.

2.1.2 Creative entrepreneurs and their identity struggles

Creative identity has been described by multiple researchers (Lange, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2018; Walzer, 2017; Werthes et al., 2018), and some of the recurring attributes of creatives include the intrinsic motivation for self-actualization and self-expression. A creative identity is also defined by its highly individualistic and independent character, as well as the striving for freedom that creatives often inherit (Nielsen et al., 2018; Werthes et al., 2018). It can consequently be argued that fashion bloggers, who create outfits and express their “self” through sharing these fashionable outfits worn by themselves – can be considered creative workers.

While an entrepreneur generally might have a larger focus on economic success (Werthes et al., 2018), people working in the creative industries might not necessarily see profitability as the main reward to their creative work (Bhansing et al., 2017). However, it can be assumed that most of the individuals working in the creative industries will have to somehow make a living, thus potentially finding themselves confronted with the imbalance between their

¹ Small and medium sized enterprise

creative identity and their entrepreneurial obligations. As Nielsen et al. (2018) argue, creative individuals have to balance their creative identity (categorized as individualistic, independent and as a form of self-expression) with social norms, the “established logic and the goal-driven reasoning of organizations and society” (p.360).

2.2 The construction of an entrepreneurial identity

As has been established above, entrepreneurs, especially in the creative industries, must balance the tensions between their identities. Researchers have argued that the concept of identity work is a way to understand how creative workers manage to handle both their creative motivations and aim for commercial success (Beech et al., 2012; Gotsi et al., 2010). Thus, the following chapter examines the notions of identity work and puts an emphasis on the concept of self-branding and storytelling, which is deemed highly relevant for the construction of identity in the fashion blogging context.

2.2.1 Identity work

Since blogging is to a large extent about ‘putting yourself out there’, displaying one’s own point of view on fashion and making one’s individuality the biggest asset, it is highly relevant for the context of this research to take a closer look at the concepts of identity and identity work.

According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), identities can occur on multiple levels, namely: organizational, individual, professional and social. The term identity has been defined by multiple researchers, including Brown (2015), who promotes that identity is the meaning individuals attach to their selves when they answer questions like “How shall I relate to others?” and “What shall I strive to become?” (p.21). Similarly, Alvesson et al. (2008) pose the questions “Who am I?” and “How should I act?” (p.6).

While there are arguments for and against identity being a static concept, researchers focusing on the approach of identity work (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018) consider identity a fluid and adaptive construction of self. Furthermore, it is commonly agreed upon that identity is constructed through interaction with others in social settings (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Watson, 2008) and is responsive to dynamic developments (Brown, 2015). The concept of identity work thus refers to individuals reflecting on their selves and their surroundings and how they should act according to external circumstances.

Identity work entails the “ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p. 298). Especially in the creative

industries, where people can feel tensions between their entrepreneurial and their creative identity, “identity work can be heightened in response to tensions” (Beech et al., 2012, p.39).

However, identity work is not only about rejecting and negotiating identities as it would presumably be the case when there are tensions between several identities within an individual or when self-doubt arises (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) – it also refers to more positively connotated acts like creating and adapting identity (Brown, 2017). Building onto this thought, the definition of identity work by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) puts the emphasis more on the positive aspects of identity construction through identity work: “The concept *identity work* refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (p.1165). This idea of constantly developing, adapting, and constructing identity can also be linked to Goffman’s (1959) statements on self-performance, which individuals execute in order to maintain a positive self-image.

Regarding fashion blogs, Titton (2015) refers to such roles (personae) a person can encompass in different situations as the “fashionable persona” (p.207). According to her, the “fashionable persona” (p.207) is a “dynamic process, changing with time and reinforced through interaction with others (fellow fashion bloggers, readers and “followers,” the media, and the larger social environment)” (p.207).

As Brydges and Sjöholm (2019) furthermore state, the profession of blogging is not just about once setting up a blog and simply writing texts, but rather about then consistently performing the self and personal style on said blog. Moreover, van Dijck (2013) highlights the fact that although social networks were once used for self-expression, they have gradually switched to “tools for (professional) *self-promotion*” (p. 200). This leads to a subject matter relevant for discussing the success of fashion bloggers: the need for (performing) the individuals’ identity and the presentation of self through the concepts of self-branding and storytelling.

2.2.2 (Self)-branding, positioning and storytelling

For influencers, when looking at the expected goals of identity work, a successful self-representation and thus recognition is probably the most wanted outcome. One of the concepts that are likely to lead to success when it comes to self-representation is to establish a brand, which is not only advisable for companies but can and should also be of importance for individuals (Johnson, 2017; Salenbacher, 2016). Positioning and self-branding plays an increasing role for influencers on social media since they might eventually become a human brand attracting their audience and making profits by promoting products. The following

chapter will give an overview over what the term brand entails and what makes self-branding, especially in the context of social media, so relevant. Self-branding did not just emerge recently with the rise of Web 2.0 and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or LinkedIn. Instead, it has been discussed for decades, with one of the most prominent representatives of the idea being Erving Goffman who discussed the concept of self-presentation and the way in which individuals try to influence how they are seen by others (Goffman, 1959). However, the rise of social media has certainly established a culture where self-presentation and consequently self-branding with the aim of “commercial gain and/or cultural capital” (Khamis et al., 2016, p.1) are of major significance. Khedher (2014) even argues that anyone using social networks is creating a personal brand, willingly or not.

First, it needs to be established what a ‘brand’ encompasses. The brand is a strategic tool that companies use to articulate an organization’s value and distinctiveness from competitors (Horst, 2019), as well as “the sum of all...corporate behaviors and communications” (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p.21). Based on what Keller (2012) has established, there are two components that make a brand strong: a) brand awareness and b) brand associations. The former comprises consumers knowing about the brand and connecting the brand as a supplier of a certain product. The latter implies that consumers have strong and relevant associations with the brand(name). To evoke a positive association with the image of a brand is thus a central goal for organizations, since it adds value to said brand (Kosteljik & Alsem, 2020).

After all, it is not only products that can be commercially branded, but likewise individuals can benefit from marketing themselves and becoming a brand, not only, but especially public figures (on Instagram) (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Johnson, 2017; Khamis et al., 2016; Khedher, 2014). As Khamis et al. (2016) state, “Self-branding...involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital” (p.1), which, according to Johnson (2017), entails “developing, maintaining and promoting one’s personal brand” (p.21). Self-or personal branding can be of importance for several situations in an individual’s life. Johnson (2017) for example argues that for students it is relevant to develop and maintain their personal brand (on social media and in real life), especially when it comes to future employers and job opportunities.

What has been established so far also raises the need for discussing the terms *persona* and *positioning*. The persona is the “articulated form of the brand’s character and personality” (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p.21), which should be easy to recognize, memorable and should create an emotional bond with the brand (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Furthermore, an authentic and believable persona will strengthen trust and loyalty from the customers

towards the organization/product (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Alongside the establishment of a persona, it is also highly relevant to choose a distinctive position for the brand, meaning “which ‘position’ a brand has to take in relation to competing brands in the head of a customer” (Kosteljik & Alsem, 2020, p.14). These efforts combined will create a certain image of the brand/influencer in the customer’s/follower’s mind that should ideally be positively associated.

Positioning one’s own personal brand as a fashion blogger on Instagram requires one more important aspect that needs to be considered – *storytelling*. As Salenbacher (2016) states: “Your story, well told, will influence the perception of your product” (p.175). Albeit being directed towards the marketing of products, this statement by Salenbacher (2016) suggests that storytelling is of crucial value to spread the message of a brand, in this case, the story of an influencer. Based on the findings of Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) this means that in return, spreading these values and positioning oneself will lead to an emotional connection between the followers and the influencer, which consequently results in loyalty and trust towards the influencer. Since a large extent of the business model of influencers is to promote other brands’ products (Marwick, 2013), a convincing narrative is of high relevance for consumers (followers) to buy the promoted products (Lund et al., 2018). As Lund et al. (2018) suggest, the distinction of a brand comes from telling a special story, which according to Salenbacher (2016) should be credible and authentic. Stories are inevitably told when sharing content, making content producers storytellers (Lund et al., 2018). If a certain story is truly appealing and evokes high arousal (whether positive or negative), it will spread around the social networks all around the world and go ‘viral’ (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Lund et al., 2018) – supporting the brand of the storyteller, in this case of the influencer.

2.3 The business of fashion blogging

Now that the characteristics of identity construction have been established, it is time to take a further look at the specific group of interest for this research – fashion bloggers. Fashion bloggers are a specifically relevant case within the blogosphere since they have an enormous impact on the fashion industry, a topic that will be highlighted in chapter 2.4.2.

Since their first appearance in the 1990s, personal blogs have witnessed a large growth in popularity (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Findlay, 2015). With several million fashion-related blogs surfacing in the following years (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Findlay, 2015), fashion blogging has become a phenomenon worth studying, especially in the context of digital entrepreneurship.

Halvorsen et al. (2013) explain fashion blogs as follows: “Fashion bloggers bring their readers up-to-date information on trends and inspire them by showcasing the bloggers’ personal styles” (p.213). On fashion related blogs, users share their own perspective on the world of fashion, related to both current trends and overall personal preferences in fashion. Blogs can consequently be seen as an opportunity for people not working in the fashion industry to still share their point of view with an audience. This participation of outsiders in an otherwise elitist sphere is possible due to the participatory character of Web 2.0 (Deuze, 2007) “which lowers entry barriers to publishing a personal point of view for a potentially worldwide audience” (Pedroni, 2015, p.180), especially for people not initially located in a fashion related professional environment. This is also true geographically – while most of the important decisions in fashion are made in metropolises like New York, Paris or Milan, blogging enables fashion enthusiasts to take part in the global discourse even from remote places (Rocamora, 2012). On a side note, Halvorsen et al. (2013) point out that blogs on fashion also are and have been written by industry professionals sharing their insights and professional knowledge.

2.3.1 History of fashion blog(ger)s

During the evolution of blogging, the platforms have undergone a transition from mostly text-based posts with hardly any images to a mostly image-based way of bloggers presenting their individual take on fashion (Findlay, 2015). More importantly, in the course of time, the utilization of new digital technologies has turned the display of personal lives, outfits and lifestyle as a hobby and digital manifestation of bloggers’ passion into an online business (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019).

Findlay (2015), who discusses the history of fashion blogging, notes that there have been two waves within the development of fashion blogging in the early 2000’s. While the first wave was to a large extent characterized by fashion industry outsiders who promoted their alternative and creative look at fashion, bloggers in the second wave soon developed into insiders, sharing “the commercial practices and values of the fashion industry” (Findlay, 2015, p.158). Duffy and Hund argue that in the self-representation of these second-generation fashion bloggers the boundaries between leisure and work are blurred, since they manage to portray “the glam life” (2015, p.6) with access to luxury clothing and accessories, attending exclusive events and traveling to extravagant destinations – which looks like enviable leisure time, but is indeed paid content.

2.3.2 From bloggers to influencers

As mentioned above, over time the formerly independent fashion bloggers have grown to become a key feature of strategy in digital marketing for fashion brands (Park et al., 2016). The individuals who once wrote blog entries and uploaded photos of their daily outfits just for fun soon caught the attention of fashion brands sensing an opportunity for low-cost and authentic marketing of their products. Since these bloggers can influence a (large) target audience, they have become substantial for brands' campaigns on social media that aim to increase sales or engagement with the brand (Sudha M.& Sheena K., 2017). This was the moment when bloggers turned into influencers, which de Perthuis and Findlay (2019) define as follows:

Influencers are public personalities with a significant social media following who use their profiles to aestheticize and monetize their lifestyle in various ways – through posting sponsored content, advertisements, and affiliate links, and engaging in brand partnerships – thereby promoting awareness and consumption of partnered brands to their followers. (p. 225)

However, those followers exhibit distinct motivations for using Instagram and thus following influencers that have to be taken into account, which are amongst others: social interaction as well as surveillance and knowledge about others (Huang & Su, 2018; Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016); diversion/escapism (Huang & Su, 2018; Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015); inspiration (Mull & Lee, 2014) and information (Shao, 2009). In the specific case of fashion related content on social media, users might follow fashion bloggers to receive information on latest news in fashion or get inspiration. This can eventually lead to the users emulating what they see, by purchasing products their favorite blogger uses or wears. In return, the blogger/influencer will receive a payment from brands for displaying their products. This marketing approach however has led to several problems with regards to the marking and indication of paid content in the past, including court decisions and the resulting obligation to always indicate when content results out of a paid partnership with a brand (Rzepka, 2020; Störmer, 2020).

On a different note, working as a fashion blogger is not only about the entrepreneurial aspects. It has to be considered that influencers have to present themselves in an authentic way (Duffy, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013), which is often described as “realness” (Duffy, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Rocamora, 2018) and requires the ability to perform and brand oneself in order to be successful. Brydges and Sjöholm (2019) discuss the concept of aesthetic labor, that “critically analyses labour conditions in service sector

employment where employees are hired for their embodied aesthetic characteristics and abilities” (p.121), which can directly be related to fashion bloggers who perform embodied aesthetics by producing a style or certain looks that attract and resonate with their audience (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Rocamora, 2011) and result in entrepreneurial opportunities.

A concept that is of interest in the context of self-branding is that of *micro-celebrities* (Khamis et al., 2016). Khamis et al. (2016) argue that fame or a celebrity status was a privilege to those popular in the culture industries, sports, or politics, or who were born into a family of such. However, “self-branding makes fame and/or celebrity more attainable” (Khamis et al., 2016, p.5) as this practice is “designed for maximising prominence, recognition and loyalty” (Khamis et al., 2016, p.5), especially for ‘ordinary’ people. To establish a convincing and strong online identity was already possible through blogs or websites, but according to the authors social media accelerated the process of individuals branding themselves (Khamis et al., 2016). A convincing and authentic self-representation of a blogger will lead to appreciation for personality or style by the users, which in return will attract a large audience and consequently attract brands and paid partnerships (Marwick, 2013).

2.4 Influencers on Instagram and their relevance for the fashion industry

The following chapter focuses on both the emergence of content creators on Instagram in the area of fashion as well as on the role fashion influencers are taking on Instagram and within the fashion industry.

2.4.1 Instagram – from snapshots to best shot

The literature discussed so far has to the largest extent portrayed the characteristics and development of fashion blogging on web-blogs. Considering that they have existed for a relatively short amount of time, (fashion) blogs have undergone several changes and developed from a purely creative outlet in the first place to a potential lucrative business for many. However, even in only this short period of time, it is not blogs that the fashion industry is primarily interested in anymore – it is Instagram. In 2010, Instagram was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger (Hartmans, 2020; Instagram, 2021a). Within a month, the app was downloaded by one million users (Hartmans, 2020), a number that has multiplied up to one billion users in June 2018 (Tankovska, 2021). At first, the idea of Instagram was spontaneity and immediacy in sharing photographs with friends, yet it has somewhat developed into a platform for professional photography and branded content over the years (de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). The business for Instagram page states that millions of companies interact

with the community, with 90% of users following one brand on Instagram (Instagram, 2021b). Furthermore, 50% of users are showing more interest in a brand when they see an ad for said brand (Instagram, 2021b). These numbers show that Instagram has developed into a platform worth utilizing for organizations in order to reach a large audience and consequently attract potential (new) customers.

Over the last years, Instagram as a platform made steps towards the fashion industry, by establishing a fashion team led by Eva Chen, the Vice President of Fashion Partnerships on Instagram (Fernandez, 2020). Additionally, Instagram introduced new features such as the Swipe-up link and the option for customers to buy directly from the platform - making Instagram essential and highly relevant for e-commerce (Fernandez, 2020). Especially in Covid-19 times, online retail has become even more relevant for fashion brands (Prokasky, 2020).

2.4.2 Influencers as a business model for fashion companies

A group of people that is in focus when speaking of the potential fashion brands see in Instagram are influencers. Before the emergence of social media and a participatory web culture, trends in fashion have (more or less) solely been impacted by runway shows or magazines. Today however, they are rather shaped by street-style inspired fashion influencers on Instagram and the way they portray the latest fashion (Findlay, 2015; Park et al., 2016). It has been argued that Instagram has replaced fashion magazines, as most people nowadays discover fashion online and the growth of Instagram led to a \$1.6 billion influencer economy (Sherman, 2018).

Although not being recognized by fashion media professionals in the beginning (Rocamora, 2018), bloggers contributed in the “discursive production of fashion blogging” (Rocamora, 2018, p.65) for several years. As most bloggers are/were ‘ordinary’ people not involved in the industry, their influence on large audiences is said to “challenge the elite, top-down world of high fashion” (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019, p.120). However, eventually – more specifically since the spring/summer fashion shows in 2009, where selected bloggers were placed in the front-rows – bloggers held their entrance into the fashion industry (Findlay, 2015).

Considering the low entry barriers for users and the chance for lower-cost marketing, many brands, especially the ones situated in the fashion industry, were attracted to use Instagram (Berezhna, 2018a; de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). Pursuing a strategy on Instagram that makes the followers engage with the brand and their products potentially increases the

chance of users eventually becoming customers. According to de Perthuis and Findlay (2019), fashion influencers are intermediaries between the producers of fashion products and their target market. They do so by portraying an aesthetic and desirable life (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019) that is an inspiration to many, resulting in their followers trying to copy their style and buying the displayed products.

To achieve this result, it is vital for most brands to create brand buzz with the help of strategically chosen influencers (Berezhna, 2018b), who match and represent the brands' values and will attract the target audience. A prime example for that is the comparatively new brand Fashion Nova that partnered up with well-chosen influencers such as rap superstar Cardi B who has led the brand to its rise (Berezhna, 2018b). Nonetheless, the relevance of nano² or micro-influencers² should not be neglected. Although they might have a smaller audience, their audience might be more engaged with the person behind the account and is thus more relevant for a brand (Berezhna, 2018b).

Overall, the importance of Instagram and influencers as intermediaries for marketing purposes due to the establishment of a strong online community and the exchange with customers for fashion brands has grown over the years and is constantly evolving.

2.5 Summary - From Entrepreneurs to Fashion Influencers on Instagram

After introducing the term of entrepreneurship and focusing on the entrepreneurial identity here, the bridge towards creative entrepreneurs was build, paying particular attention to the potential identity struggles in this métier. The building of an entrepreneurial identity is hence a prerequisite for those entrepreneurs, including identity work, (self-)branding, positioning and storytelling in order to be successful. That also applies for the specific business of fashion blogging, which was scrutinized subsequently, looking at both their history and their evolution from fashion bloggers to fashion influencers - the main topic of this research.

Bringing it all together, the connection between said fashion influencers and Instagram, their platform of choice and relevance, was made, concluding the theoretical framework.

² There are various definitions on which exact follower number is connected to the tiers of influencers. For the purpose of this research, the definition of de Perthuis and Findlay (2019) will be adopted: "Celebrity influencers have 1.5 million or more followers; mega influencers have between 501 k and 1.5 m; macro influencers between 101 and 500 k followers; and micro influencers[...] have between 10 and 100 k followers" (p. 226). Furthermore, the term nano-influencer is of relevance for this research, which most commonly includes those with a following up to 10 k followers and are typically characterized by a high engagement rate, hence why they are of interest for companies.

3. Method

This chapter will explain the method that is chosen to conduct the research, including: the sampling strategy and research units, the data collection process, the operationalization of concepts, the analysis process of the data gathered, as well as a discussion of the quality criteria.

3.1 Choice of a qualitative methodology

Although there is an abundance of literature on the impact of fashion influencers on the fashion industry (Berezhna, 2018a, 2018b; de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019; Rocamora, 2018) and on the characteristics of digital entrepreneurship (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Horst et al., 2019; Horst & Hitters, 2020), it has not been extensively examined which strategies implemented by influencers contribute to the success of said individuals.

Since the research focuses on (entrepreneurial) identity and identity work, with both concepts being highly personal, a qualitative approach aiming to illustrate and understand the potentially complex personal experiences and reflections of the respondents with these concepts is deemed the most appropriate (Malterud, 2001; Marshall, 1996). As Jackson et al. (2007) state, this approach is also called “‘thick-descriptive’ because of the richness and detail to the discussion” (p.23). Creswell (2009) argues that qualitative research aims to understand and explore “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.22); thus enabling the researcher to make sense and understand said social phenomena and gain in-depth information from the individuals who experienced these phenomena themselves (Boeije, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Malterud, 2001). Furthermore, it is of interest to explore the topic under study with a flexible approach that allows for the yielding of detailed information, as the field of identity work usage amongst fashion influencers has not yet been examined extensively (Boeije, 2012).

The research question will be answered by means of in-depth interviews. These interviews will be semi-structured in order to enable the respondents to state their personal opinion on the topic under study in their own words (Boeije, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Grosseohme, 2014; Jackson et al., 2007). Conducting interviews with open ended questions allows for the interviewees to illustrate their experiences of working as a fashion blogger, including the role of identity work, in detail. As mentioned above, the concepts of interest for this research do not only include entrepreneurial strategies, but also highly personal topics such as self-perception, identity, and self-presentation. Consequently, giving the respondents the opportunity to share their own story by not restricting them to a fixed and standardized set of questions will help yield rich data (Jackson et al., 2007). The semi-structured approach of

the interviews furthermore allows for potential follow-up questions on topics that arise during the interview and pose another perspective on the topic (Boeije, 2012; Grossoehme, 2014).

After having conducted the interviews, the data will be systematically organized and the meaning of the data will be interpreted (Boeije, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Jackson et al., 2007). The method of analyzing said data will be outlined in chapter 3.5. Additionally, the quality criteria of this research will be taken into account (see chapter 3.6).

3.2 Sampling

After having explained the choice for a qualitative approach to this research, the following chapter will give an overview over the sampling strategies that have been pursued and the research units that have been chosen.

3.2.1 Sampling method

As the aim of this research is to find out about the personal experiences and strategies as well as the potential adaptation of identity work amongst fashion bloggers on Instagram, a qualitative approach has been chosen. Contrary to quantitative research, the sample for qualitative research does not have to represent the large population, the research rather tries to “represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences” (Boeije, 2012, p.36) and to provide understanding of complex issues related to personal behavior (Marshall, 1996). Since the respondents had to meet several criteria that will be introduced in chapter 3.2.2, purposive sampling ensures that the interviewees chosen from the sampling universe had a lot of insights and knowledge about the topics that are of importance for this specific research (Boeije, 2012; Emmel, 2013; Robinson, 2014; Silverman, 2011). It is expected that the descriptions and experiences of potential respondents can, when being studied in-depth, provide detailed insights (Emmel, 2013). The method of criterion sampling allows for consulting experts in the area of fashion blogging on Instagram who meet pre-established criteria based on both the previously established theoretical framework and the characteristics needed to fit the scope of this research (Emmel, 2013; Sarstedt et al., 2018).

After reaching out to potential interview partners via email and having conducted the first few interviews, the initial respondents helped me to get in contact with further potential candidates. This snowball sampling was helpful to approach bloggers that were not initially contacted but who would nonetheless be likely willed to share their experiences with me and thus be qualified for participating (Boeije, 2012; Marshall, 1996; Robinson, 2014). Snowball

sampling was especially useful since the target group, although quite large in size, was difficult to reach and responses to initial requests sent out by email were low.

During the interviewing process, the decision was made to also include individuals that were still at the early stages of being a blogger on Instagram (meaning they have not yet had any monetary rewards for their work) in this research, since the opportunity to do so arose amidst looking into potential interviewees and finding accounts of said beginners on Instagram (Emmel, 2013).

Eventually, by mixing these sampling approaches, 10 interviews have been conducted which, while also considering scale and time of this research, provide sufficient in-depth information and allow for a meaning-making analysis.

3.2.2 Research participants

As mentioned above, criterion sampling was used in order to guarantee that the entrepreneurs would have personal experience and knowledge in the field. They should meet the following criteria:

First of all, for the purpose of this research, female fashion bloggers on Instagram from Germany are the group of interest since the author is based in Germany and has thus easier access to a German target group. Second, the term *fashion blogger* has to be defined, as fashion and outfit related posts are common amongst a lot of users on Instagram. As established in the theoretical framework, a fashion blogger/content creator on Instagram is a person that showcases their personal style online (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Since the aim of this study is to find out about how bloggers use identity work as a strategy to create a successful business model, the respondents must have had some sort of monetary benefits from their profession on Instagram or at least must have had the opportunity to enter a brand partnership (thus creating a business). Furthermore, the interview partners should neither have only a few dozens of followers (which most likely entails not having paid partnerships), nor should they be on the extremely rare end of the spectrum where being a fashion influencer made the person behind the account a (fashion) superstar outside of the social media world.

Lastly, it has to be noticed that fashion bloggers do not only post fashion related content, but rather also include other lifestyle related content such as interior, food or travel photographs and videos. However, the respondents' main content should focus on fashion for them to count as a fashion blogger.

| Respondent | Age | Followers on Instagram (Status: Day of Interview) | Duration Interview |
|-------------------|------------|--|---------------------------|
| Respondent 1 | 30 | 11.4 k | 01:14:20 |
| Respondent 2 | 24 | 80.2 k | 00:59:18 |
| Respondent 3 | 29 | 76.2 k | 01:02:29 |
| Respondent 4 | 25 | 5.7 k | 01:01:18 |
| Respondent 5 | 26 | 19 k | 01:02:49 |
| Respondent 6 | 25 | 1.4 k | 00:47:45 |
| Respondent 7 | 26 | 22.5 k | 00:54:06 |
| Respondent 8 | 26 | 5 k | 00:45:21 |
| Respondent 9 | 24 | 1.5 k | 00:59:27 |
| Respondent 10 | 23 | 10.6 k | 01:05:45 |

Table 1: Overview Interview Respondents.³

3.3 Data collection

The search for potential interview partners took place entirely on Instagram, by first of all reaching out to fashion bloggers/influencers already known to the researcher and then subsequently looking out for further bloggers who were either linked on the initial accounts or whom the initial accounts followed, to a) not be biased by personal preference and b) have a further spread-out sample.

Due to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, online interviews have been scheduled either through Zoom or FaceTime. The interviews have been recorded via the Zoom recording program and additionally via the iPhone voice recorder to eliminate the chance of technical failure. These records have then been transcribed verbatim in order to be analyzed later on.

The respondents were sent a form of consent explaining the aim and conditions of this research. They were asked to either kindly sign it or give their consent to be recorded and for the resulting data to be used for this research via mail. The form can be found in Appendix B.

3.4 Operationalization

This study aims to explore the extent to which fashion bloggers on Instagram use identity work in order to become successful entrepreneurs. Theoretical concepts that have already been introduced in the second chapter will be used for: a) constructing an according topic list for the semi-structured interviews and b) for later on analyzing and coding the data in

³ A more detailed overview over the respondents can be found in Appendix A.

consideration of (but not restricted to) these concepts. A topic list on which the interview questions have been established can be found in Appendix C.

The list entails some more general topics that will need no further definition, such as:

- The professional/academic background of the blogger
- The role of Instagram and the role of the followers (including time spent on Instagram, the benefits and downsides of Instagram, the way in which blogger and follower communicate and the handling of feedback)
- Conditions in their field of work (feedback from friends and family, goals they work towards, the role of networking, expectation of future developments and events)

Amongst the theoretical framework established, there are topics that are of a more abstract character which need further definition and will thus be operationalized below.

3.4.1 Entrepreneurship & identity

The following table continues operationalizations on the topic of entrepreneurial identity and the notions related to the labor of fashion blogging based on the theoretical framework established in chapter 2, followed by potential questions for the interviews.

| Concept | Definition | Possible Interview Questions |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Entrepreneurial Identity | “This means, the quest for building an entrepreneurial identity becomes the task of managing all strategic and brand-related activities in ongoing manner” (Horst et al., 2019, p.5). | What are the main characteristics of an entrepreneur in your opinion? In how far does that apply to you, would you consider yourself as an entrepreneur? Did your personal/academic background affect your choice for entrepreneurship? |
| Working as a Fashion Blogger | “Fashion bloggers produce fashion media partly based on the enactment of their own self-identity in relation to dress practices and on their incorporation of knowledge of fashion media and pop culture imagery” (Titton, 2015, p.201). “Fashion blogs are written by both fashion professionals and ordinary people with an interest in fashion. Fashion bloggers bring their readers up-to-date information on trends and inspire them by showcasing the bloggers’ personal styles” (Halvorsen et al., 2013, p.213). | Why are you doing it? What motivates and drives you to continue it? What role does fashion play in the development of your identity? Why did you choose to post (mostly) fashion related content on Instagram? |

Table 2: Operationalization of entrepreneurial identity in fashion blogging.

3.4.2 Identity work

The operationalization of identity work contains definitions on performing “the self”, struggles with merging multiple identities, the act of self-branding and positioning as well as storytelling.

| Concept | Definition | Possible Interview Questions |
|---|--|--|
| Adaptation and Performance of Identity and “The Self” / Identity Work | Identity work “denotes the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p.298). | Do you sometimes have to perform different roles? When is that the case? In what way does the representation of yourself change in various (work) settings? How do you see yourself? |
| Identity Struggles | “However, CCI entrepreneurs struggle with their entrepreneurial identity. One common attribute among them is that they do not regard themselves as entrepreneurs and avoid acting entrepreneurially” (Werthes et al., 2018, p.291). | Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur/artist/creative worker/influencer? How do you experience being an “”? Could you describe that? |
| Self-branding | “Self-branding, which is sometimes called personal branding, involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital” (Khamis et al., 2016, p.1). | How do you present yourself? How successful are these presentations of yourself? How do you see yourself most of the time? (Role(s), attitude, etc.) How do you feel about “putting yourself out there” and becoming a “brand”? Are there challenges when becoming a brand? How do you manage these challenges? |
| Positioning | “Positioning is the determination of the desired associations that a consumer should have with a brand. The positioning is then ‘the desired brand image’” (Kosteljik & Alsem, 2020, p.14) | Why did you choose to post (mostly) fashion related content on Instagram? Which role do you take on Instagram? |
| Storytelling | When people connect in social media and share content with their virtual friends and acquaintances, they are in essence all storytellers and the sharing of stories is how they perform socialities. If a story has sufficient appeal and interest, it can spread beyond people's own networks in social media and potentially be shared around the globe. It can go ‘viral’. Hence, if people have the right storytelling competencies, the potential dissemination and reach of stories can result in them influencing millions of people. Thus, great storytelling leads to influence and power; it can affect discourses (Lund et al., 2018, p.273). | What stories do you present about yourself on Instagram? Are there things you would want to present about yourself on Instagram but you refrain yourself from doing so because you are “afraid” of the feedback? In what ways is Instagram helping you with sharing your story? |

Table 3: Operationalization of identity work.

3.5 Methods of analysis

The goals of qualitative data analysis are to a) structure and break down large amounts of data into segments and b) to put these segments back together to create meaningful categories

in order to systematically answer the research question (Boeije, 2012; Creswell, 2009). For a systematical analysis of the data gathered in the in-depth interviews a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, entailing the three stages of open, axial and selective coding will be used (Boeije, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2009). A thematic analysis helps to identify recurring patterns and thus resulting themes within data while at the same being flexible when it comes to the underlying theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis should benefit the research by obtaining meaningful information and in-depth insights of the data (Boeije, 2012).

The coding process, which was conducted manually, underwent the following steps and are now reported from my personal point of view: First of all, I already took notes on important aspects during the interview, thus already keeping an eye out on similarities or differences in the data. Then, in the next step, I re-read the data to have a more detailed overview. This was followed by the first step of coding (open coding), which entailed the fragmentation of data, then in return assigning specific codes to the fragments (Boeije, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2009). This was again done manually, visual documentation of these steps can be found in Appendix D. The open coding resulted in a total of 341 initial codes, which were then condensed to a total of 316 codes. As a second step, axial coding was carried out, in which the relation between the established codes was examined and the data (codes) were categorized into main and sub-categories, following their importance and re-occurrence (Boeije, 2012), resulting in 30 categories and subcategories.

Boeije (2012) states that, with selective coding, important categories are determined, and the most important concepts are described. Additionally, possible connections between the categories will be explored, and overarching themes will be established. These themes will help to answer the research question, hence why this will be the last step in the thematic analysis. Further visual documentation of the manual coding process can be found in Appendix D.

| Interview Data Fragment | Assigned Open Code |
|---|--|
| <i>„Also ich denke, das ist ein ganz, ganz wichtiger Punkt, weil Influencer Marketing auch viel mit Sympathie zu tun hat“ (Respondent 3)</i> | High importance of networking |
| <i>„Aber ich glaube schon auch, dass irgendwann Instagram wahrscheinlich von einer anderen App abgelöst wird.“ (Respondent 3)</i> | Scepticism/ uncertainty regarding future on Instagram |
| <i>„Also z.B. zeige ich ja auch viel meine Katze oder wenn ich bei meinen Eltern bin zeige ich nie meine Eltern oder meinen Freund oder meinen Bruder.“ (Respondent 10)</i> | Not/rarely posting private content (friends, family, relationship issues etc.) |

| | |
|---|---|
| „Aber auch immer, wenn ich Probleme habe und eine Frage stelle habe ich immer superschnell Feedback, wie bei einer Freundin so ein bisschen.“ (Respondent 2) | Appreciation for exchange with community on Instagram |
| „Also ich hab mit 13 angefangen zu nähen und wollte immer Modedesignerin werden. Aber tatsächlich hab ich das dann nicht gemacht, natürlich auch so ein bisschen wegen Karriereperspektiven, weil es mir ein bisschen zu unsicher war. Und dann hab ich mir vorgenommen, dass ich auf jeden Fall dann aber im Mode Bereich arbeiten möchte.“ (Respondent 7) | Passion for fashion |

Table 4. Exemplary representation of selected open codes.

| Open Codes | Axial Codes (Categories) |
|--|------------------------------------|
| No prior academical background related to fashion/ social media | Professional/academical background |
| Prior professional background related to fashion/ social media | |
| Main occupation outside Instagram priority | |
| Shaping identity in different situations | Adapting Identity |
| Hiding blogger personality in private encounters | |
| Playing different roles in different contexts due to fear of disapproval | |
| Posting “shallow” content | Storytelling |
| Sharing different stories with online community than with friends | |
| Not/rarely posting about political/ religious topics | |
| Instagram as an influence to follow trends | (Adapting to) Trends |
| Following trends but staying true to one’s self | |
| Following trends because of Instagram | |
| Active planning of posts | Image |
| Sharing selected content only | |
| Selective decision on cooperation partners | |

Table 5. Exemplary representation of selected axial codes.

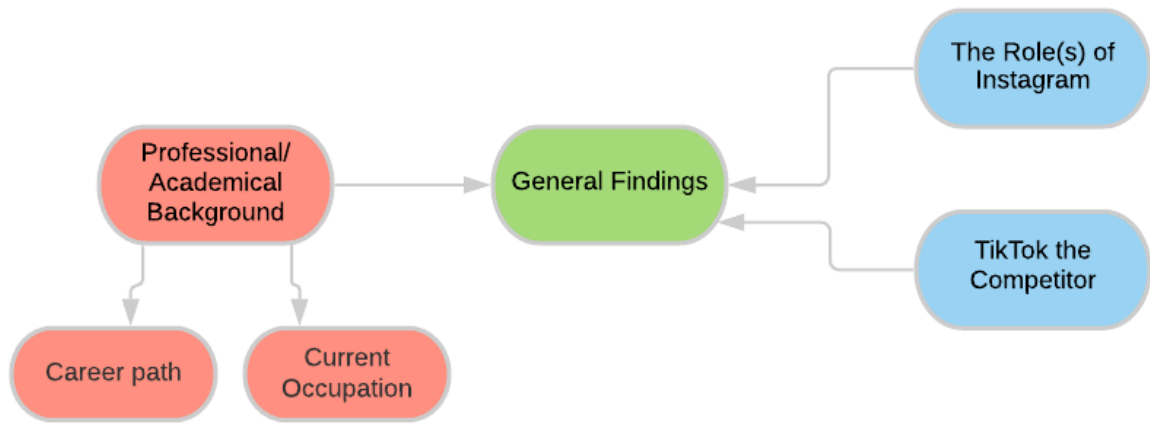


Figure 1: *Final coding stage and establishment of “General Findings”*. Source: Own creation.

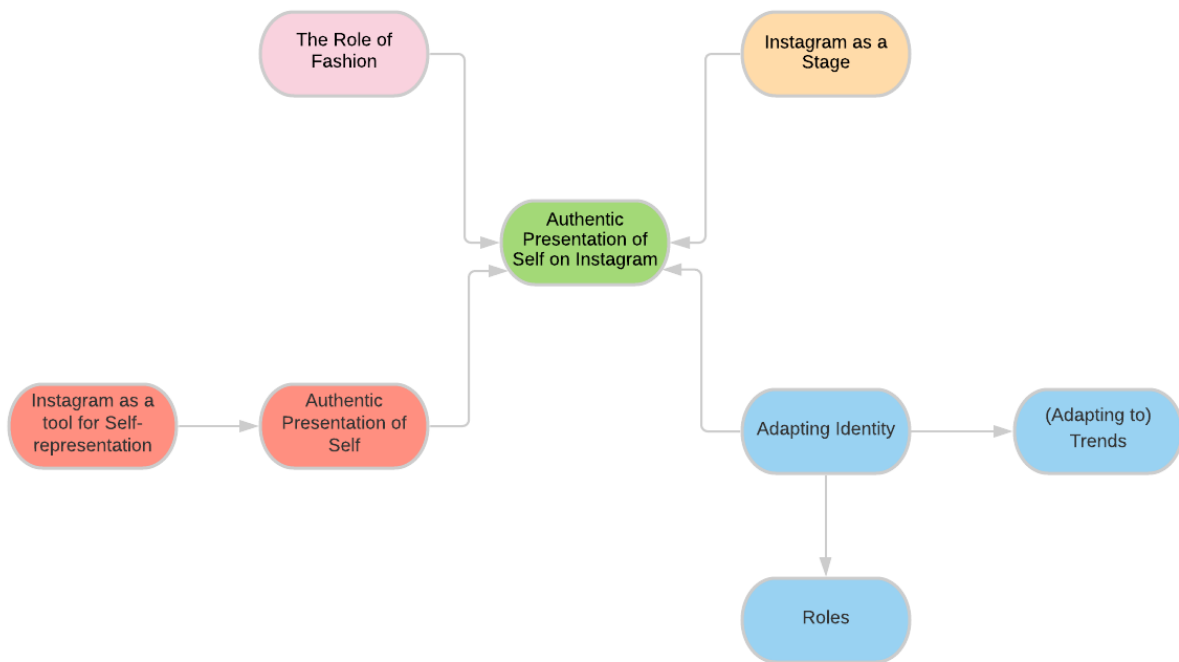


Figure 2: *Final coding stage and establishment of overarching theme “Authentic Presentation of Self on Instagram”*. Source: Own creation.

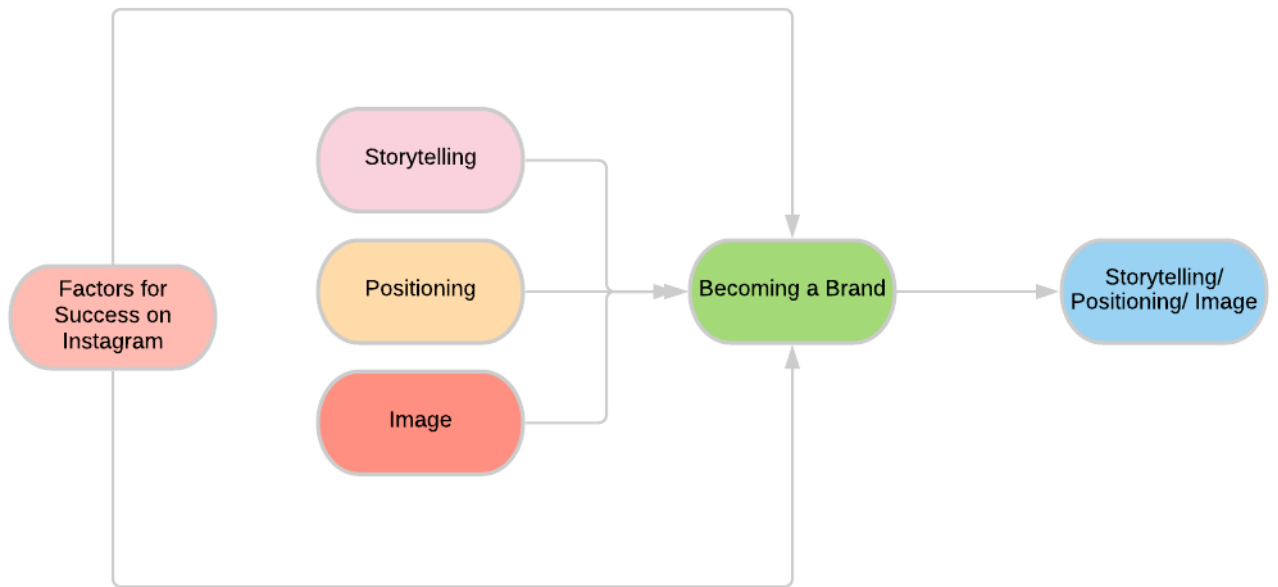


Figure 3: Final coding stage and establishment of overarching theme “Storytelling/Positioning/Image”. Source: Own creation.

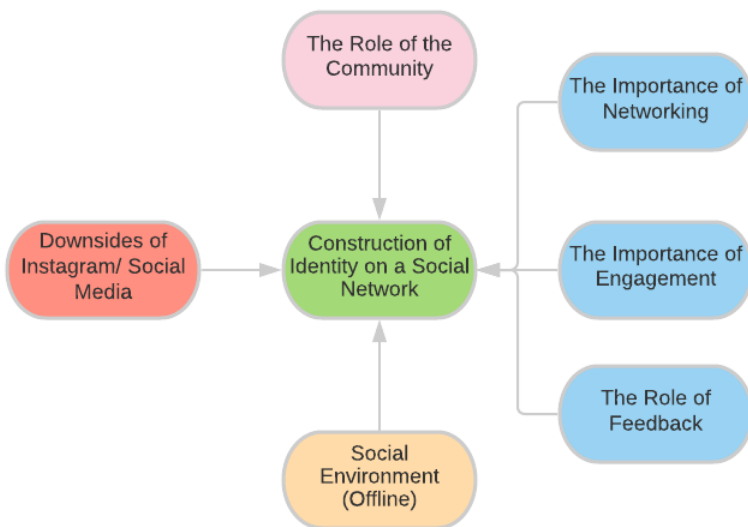


Figure 4: Final coding stage and establishment of overarching theme “Construction of Identity on a Social Network”. Source: Own creation.

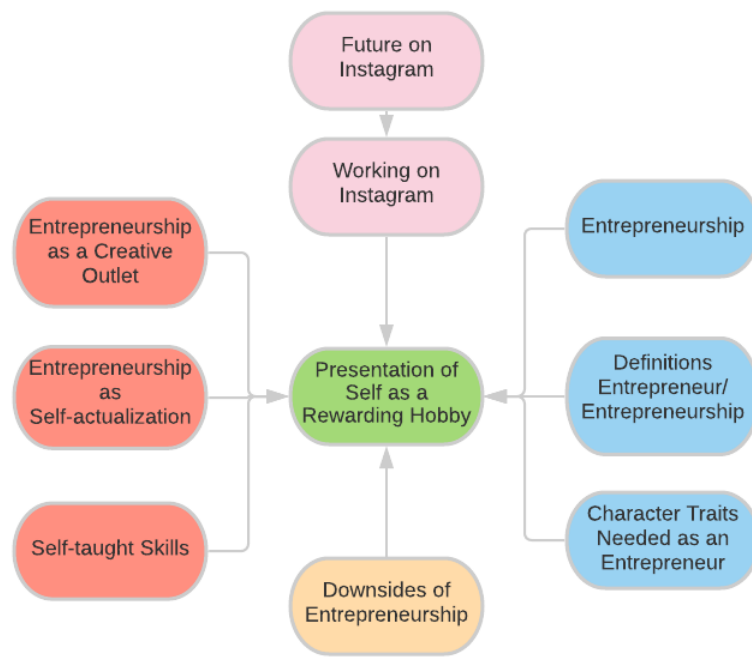


Figure 5: Final coding stage and establishment of overarching theme “Presentation of Self as a Rewarding Hobby”. Source: Own creation.

3.6 Quality criteria

As Flick (2007a) puts it: “Quality in qualitative research is the result of efforts in planning, conducting and reporting qualitative research” (p. 66). Consequently, this chapter will provide an overview over the actions taken in order to ensure quality.

3.6.1 Validity and reliability

According to Silverman (2011), reliability deals with the replicability of a research project, meaning that if future researchers were to conduct the same research project, they would have to come up with the same results. In order to ensure this reliability of a research project, several authors (Flick, 2007a; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Silverman, 2011) suggest being transparent about the research design and data analysis approach as well as the theoretical framework that topic list and subsequently the analysis were based on (Alasuutari, 1996). Furthermore, Moisander and Valtonen (2006) argue that research has to be conducted “in a systematic and rigorous manner” (p.26), which has been done by firstly transcribing the interviews and following that the careful manual allocation of codes, categories and lastly themes.

A transparent description of the overall research process has been provided in this chapter and additional visual material on the systematic data analysis and coding process, as well as the topic list and interview questions can be found in Appendix C, D and E.

Validity is defined by Silverman (2011) as the “truthfulness of findings” (p.360), or as Moisander and Valtonen (2006) phrase it “the truth or accuracy of the representations and generalizations made by the researcher” (p.23). To ensure the validity of this research, I based the design of my research on a theoretical framework which has been established in both chapter 2 and the operationalization paragraph in this chapter.

Regarding this research, I acknowledge my role as a researcher, in which my personal characteristics as well as my professional experiences in the area under study might have had an influence on the interaction between me and the respondents and consequently the objectivity and accuracy of the claims made (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

3.6.2 Research ethics

According to Flick (2007b), cases of severe misuse in research have led to the establishment of certain criteria to ensure a responsible and considerate practice in research. To ensure these ethical principles in this study, several steps were taken. Firstly, it was made sure that the participants did not belong to a vulnerable group (Boeije, 2012; Flick, 2007b) and the information they would potentially share were, albeit focusing on the respondents’ feelings, experiences and identity development, not overly intimate. Prior to the interviews, the respondents were sent an informed consent form in which they were explained the purpose of the research (without giving away too much detail such as the research question (Flick, 2007b)), as well the clarification that their participation is voluntary and can be stopped at any time. Furthermore, to ensure anonymity (Boeije, 2012; Flick, 2007b), they were informed that only their first name or the term “respondent” with the respective number would be used in the research, and that their signature to the form was the only way to identify them, hence why they were given the opportunity to not sign and simply agree orally. The data from the interviews has been kept secure and has not been shared with any other person, thus guaranteeing confidentiality (Boeije, 2012; Flick, 2007b).

4. Findings

This research explored the question: *To what extent do fashion influencers on Instagram make use of identity work in order to become more successful entrepreneurs?*

Based on a thematic analysis of data gathered from 10 interviews, this chapter will reveal the results of this research. The coding process has identified four main themes which will help provide an answer to the research question. Additional general findings will give a brief overview over the respondents' professional and academical background as well as their perception of the role of Instagram.

The first theme *Authentic presentation of self on Instagram* shows to which extent authenticity and trustworthiness are of importance for influencers on Instagram. Second, the theme *Storytelling and image* reveals that while adapting their identities is not necessarily the intention of bloggers, selective creation of content, omission of certain aspects of their lives and carefully considered partnerships with brands form their image on the platform. The third finding addresses the *Construction of Identity in a social network*, including the role of the online community. Lastly, the fourth theme emerging from the analysis considers the role of *Instagram as a gate opener*.

4.1 General findings

Respondent's background

In the beginning of each interview, the respondents were asked to introduce themselves, and naturally, all of them included their professional and/or academical background. Interestingly, only one respondent did not have any professional or academical background related to either social media or fashion. Everyone else was either coming from both an academical background and working experience in the area, had participated in one of the two, or decided to pursue an academical/professional career in this area due to their experiences as a blogger. Furthermore, only one of the respondents considered themselves as a full-time blogger, while the rest either identified their activity on Instagram as a second mainstay next to their main occupation or as a (more or less) lucrative hobby. This results in the respondents not necessarily feeling the pressure to earn money with their activity on Instagram.

The role of Instagram

When being asked about their opinions and experiences with Instagram and social media in general, several different points of view stood out. First and foremost, most respondents

stated that Instagram was the main platform used for content creation and networking. While some focused on the creative and inspirational aspects of Instagram, others pointed out the importance of social media for businesses:

And, of course, we mustn't forget that social media has also become a very, very large marketing platform. So it's very, very important for companies in particular to be present in social media and not to close themselves off to it (Respondent 4)⁴.

Overall, a significant role was assigned to Instagram, for both career opportunities as well as personal interests such as connecting with friends. Two of the respondents founded companies due to their prior activity on Instagram, proving the power of the platform. Despite all the positive assets to Instagram for business endeavors, it should not be neglected that Instagram is also valued as a tool for personal inspiration and self-actualization, which will be further illustrated in the next chapter.

Nonetheless, most of the respondents also criticized Instagram for the implementation of the algorithm, which according to the respondents makes it hard to be seen, to grow their reach and community, and which makes it harder to objectively evaluate the success of a post, as Respondent 2 puts together: “It's such a pity, because even if the followers somehow totally like something, it can simply be that the algorithm and Instagram is just not so d'accord with it. And accordingly, you are simply given less reach“.

TikTok – credible competitor

Considering these difficulties Instagram puts towards (especially smaller) accounts, the respondents referred to TikTok as a strong competitor for Instagram. It was expressed multiple times that if someone was to start creating content and still had to build a community, TikTok was the app of choice. Respondents recommended TikTok especially because every content on the platform can go viral which in return might lead to growing a community as Respondent 7 describes: “Then what I see for a development is really that if you're just starting now, you might even start on TikTok because yeah... there you can grow quite well and very quickly“ – whereas going viral on Instagram was deemed to be rather difficult. However, some suggested to start off on TikTok and then transferring the community to Instagram, emphasizing once again the relevance of Instagram.

⁴ All quotes have been translated from German into English for the purpose of this paper.

4.2 The true you – authentic presentation of self on Instagram?

For 7 out of 10 fashion influencers interviewed, an authentic and approachable presentation of self is a crucial strategy for success on Instagram (that means high engagement rates with the community) and can be seen as maintaining of identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). While only a few moments of a day are shared on the app, using tools like Instagram Stories makes the content much more authentic and relatable as “staged” photos, according to the respondents. It was commonly agreed upon that staying true to one’s self was necessary in order to be deemed trustworthy and bond with the audience (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010).

Contributing to this authentic presentation of self is Instagram itself. The platform was deemed an ideal space for self-presentation and self-actualization, allowing the users to express themselves in multiple creative ways. Instagram furthermore acts as a stage, on which the users can live out their various passions, including the passion for photography, their enjoyment of creative work, and, shared amongst most of the respondents, the passion for fashion. The role of fashion has also been examined during the interviews, highlighting the self-expressive character of clothing and style, as well as the fact that fashion is a creative outlet to many. With regards to authenticity, respondents stated that they consider fashion bloggers as a more down to earth inspiration and that Instagram allows everyone to present their unique style, aside of expensive haute couture or current trends.

Nonetheless, the need to adapt to trends online to a certain extent (including fashion trends or new Instagram tools) in order to stay relevant and to attract the algorithm’s attention was mentioned by many of the respondents. Still, while adapting (one’s identity) to trends, the majority articulated that staying true to one’s self was of more importance, hence why they try to incorporate such trends into their own existing style rather than changing their strategies and appearances constantly like Respondents 2 and 3 state: “Yes, you act very much according to trends, but you try..I try when posting about fashion or trends to keep my style“ (Respondent 2); “Yes, I would say that Instagram influences me a lot, but I always stay true to my style. ...So I would never wear that only for Instagram, because I don't like that myself” (Respondent 3).

Interestingly, most respondents stated that they do not pretend to be something they are not on Instagram. The playing of roles can nevertheless be observed, although in an offline context rather than online. Respondents mentioned that sometimes they had the feeling to have to adapt their identity in certain contexts, for example in a working context or amongst friends and family: “So, for example, if my boyfriend takes me to see some of his work

colleagues. I would never go over to them and say: 'Oh, I'm an influencer' somehow.. because it just has a negative touch” (Respondent 3).

Overall, an authentic and approachable self-presentation on Instagram is of significantly high relevance for the respondents. Even when slightly adapting to trends in fashion and on social media, the respondents to this study expressed the importance of staying true to one’s self, as Respondent 10 phrases it: “and maybe to stay true to yourself. Because in the end, everything already exists on social media and the only chance you have is to do your own thing, because that doesn't exist yet”.

4.3 Can I post this? – Storytelling and image

When discussing identity work, the adaptation, maintenance and shaping of identity is in focus (Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The findings of the conducted interviews revealed that the respondents did rather aim to be as true to their own selves as possible as they deemed authenticity to be needed for success on the platform. Nonetheless, one strategy of forming identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) reoccurred in most interviews – storytelling.

4.3.1 Storytelling

To put storytelling into the context of Instagram, for many respondents focusing on the “shallow” content that is outfit posts, fashion hauls or other lifestyle related content, is the strategy: “I just do not offer much surface for attack I must say, I.. because I mean.. I share pretty outfits” (Respondent 3). Most respondents expressed that they did not want to share insights into their families, friend groups or relationship, since they deemed it too private to belong on Instagram:

But for me I just somehow do not want to post about my everyday life, I also do not report about my private problems or so. ...I like to show my OOTDs of course. I like to show the dogs in our office. But beyond that I do not want to show so much (Respondent 4).

On the other hand, Respondent 4 stated that for success on the platform in the future, showing the private everyday life is what users want to see and what makes engagement rates rise.

Furthermore, respondents stated that they do not want to engage in political discussions, both because they do not have expertise in the area and because they did not want to offer a target by engaging in more controversial topics. Respondents furthermore articulated that they already include a variety of subject matters in their content, such as interior, pets or sports, in order to keep their followers engaged with everyday life content:

I always try to keep them in a good mood and entertained, try to take them through the day with me sometimes more, sometimes less ... And yeah, a good mix of my life as an entrepreneur, fashion and sports are the 3 pillars for me (Respondent 1).

Most of the interviewed creators also plan to develop their content in the future, based on the life situation they will be in.

4.3.2 Positioning and image

Telling specific stories on Instagram is directly linked to how an influencer/content creator positions themselves within the network. Since all of the respondents mostly focus on fashion related topics, strategies to stand out on the platform and distinguish themselves from other fashion creators is pivotal (Kosteljik & Alsem, 2020). In order to create an image and branding themselves, most respondents stated that they actively decide what outfits to wear and post, and that only curated content is shared in order to fit in the profile, like Respondent 8 states: “I make sure that everything fits together, that it matches the color scheme of the picture before. I don't think there is a picture of me on Instagram in sweatpants“. Even more important, since most of the respondents worked together with brands, was the careful selection of cooperation partners: “So this is not to sound stupid, I'm also grateful somehow, but I have now have a thousand requests from some cosmetics brands again. Cosmetics. No, sorry, I'm out of that. I am not the person for beauty and cosmetics“ (Respondent 1). Working with a certain brand almost automatically reflects the brand’s image onto the influencer, hence why their values need to match those of the creator for an authentic outcome. As Respondent 3 describes: “But before I accept something that doesn't suit me, I'd rather not accept it at all“. Cooperating with a brand that the influencer is convinced of will in return lead to an authentic promotion of products on their account, which will most likely be seen as trustworthy from the point of view of the followers (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010).

4.3.3 Becoming a brand

When being a public figure, having distinctive characteristics and a recognition value becomes crucial for becoming a brand. Especially since on Instagram every niche has their influencers and stars already, the only way for success on the app is creating a USP⁵ in order to stand out.

Those of the respondents who identified as a brand enjoyed the attention and the valuation of their person. However, at the same time, respondents acknowledged that there are

⁵ Unique selling proposition

also challenges when being a public figure and becoming a brand, such as negative encounters in their friend groups:

So I have also experienced a lot of crap. For example, uhm, I was once at a party of an old school friend and I'll say they ... just imitated me ... that was of course totally uncomfortable for me at that moment... (Respondent 10).

Furthermore, being a public figure on Instagram also means taking over responsibilities towards the community, with regards to product recommendations or “simply” being a good role model, as Respondent 10 expresses with regards to concerns coming from her family:

...That's why all the teenagers are becoming anorexic now and the beauty craze is big, there's so much bullying. I absolutely see that. I try, of course, to be a good role model and to approach it accordingly and to do everything in my power.

To conclude these findings, the respondents to this study intend to be as authentic as possible with how they present themselves (see 4.2). Presenting only certain facets does not mean that the stories presented are not authentic, it rather means they are forming their identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) as Respondent 7 states: “I wouldn't say that I'm pretending, just that I'm leaving things out”. However, these statements on “realness” and authenticity must be assessed critically, since it might be the case that respondents simply wanted to present themselves in the right light. This assumption will be further discussed in chapter 5.

4.4 Construction of identity in a social network

While in the preceding paragraphs construction of identity was mostly related to “the Self”, it can be argued that identity is also constructed in relation to others (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Watson, 2008). Considering that Instagram is a *social* network, it is evident that when posting on the platform, a user/content creator seeks the responses of friends/community, at least to a certain extent (Huang & Su, 2018; Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

4.4.1 The role of the community

It has been established that Instagram is a platform perfectly suited for self-actualization and presenting “the true you” as a business model. But for constructing this identity, the data from the interviews indicate that the community plays a significant role for a career on Instagram (see Horst & Hitters, 2020; Watson, 2008). As Respondent 3 states: “... as an influencer, you can't force anyone to follow you, to like your pictures, to watch your stories. Either people like it or they don't like it. And yeah, that's just self-employment where you're dependent on others”.

Besides that, six of the respondents considered their communities as likeminded and thus highly appreciated the exchange and the information provided by the followers. Considering the status of followers for the respondents both personally and with regards to their reach, it is not surprising that most of the respondents articulated the wish to grow their audience in the future.

4.4.1.1 The importance of engagement & networking

Overall, the respondents attributed a significant role to engaging with their followers and networking with others (also outside of Instagram). On Instagram, networking is executed in the form of liking people's posts, writing comments, responding to stories and most importantly, via direct messages. Eight respondents stated that exchanging with their followers via direct messages was of essential value to them, since it means more intimate and in-depth exchange, which might also result in friendships: "And for some topics or with some girls we have actually already exchanged cell phone numbers, yes, they then also contact me sometimes via WhatsApp" (Respondent 5).

At the same time, a consistent community management might also result in higher engagement rates which is in return beneficial for future partnerships with brands, as described by Respondent 3: "So of course you're constantly looking at how you can somehow grow even further, which has of course become very, very, very difficult in the meantime. ... What is actually always a good lever is community management".

Networking was not only considered crucial with regards to followers, but also with regards to reaching out to other creators and brands, both on- and offline: "I think you can score points in real life in a completely different way if you somehow really like a brand than if you simply write an anonymous mail to them, so to speak" (Respondent 2).

As Respondent 2 states here, networking is also an act of presenting oneself to new potential business partners and other contacts, hence why it should not be neglected when talking about identity construction.

4.4.1.2 The role of feedback

Focusing on the feedback that followers provide on Instagram, the analysis of the interviews put forth the assumption that feedback from the community is crucial for the respondents. Not only did the respondents value the feedback, they in fact expressed that feedback in the form of likes, comments and messages contributed to their self-confidence, as Respondent 6 puts it: "When you realize you have a positive follower interaction, or you get

many, many compliments for an outfit or for certain pictures, then that does strengthen your own self-worth”.

At the same time, many respondents said feedback in the form of likes was of lower relevance to them. One reason for that is the algorithm of Instagram that makes it harder to objectively evaluate how successful posts are. The other reason is that some respondents consider Instagram as self-actualization and are hence not troubled when the feedback to their posts turns out low. This also means that feedback is only implemented in their strategies to a certain extent, as for example stated by Respondent 7:

Yes, if now, for example, someone comments under the videos: Cool video, do more of those! Then I accept that, but whether I then implement it, that's another question. If I feel like it, then yes, definitely. But if I think to myself: No, I didn't really like it that much. Then I wouldn't do it.

Overall, the name *social* network already gives away the importance of being social and reaching out to others, and the findings of the interviews conducted suggests so too.

4.4.2 Social environment (offline)

Constructing an identity online inevitably leads to feedback on this issue with people from the offline surroundings of a content creator. While the majority of respondents stated that friends and family support and respect their occupation: “They say: ...You're not just a friend, but I also think it's totally exciting what you're doing in the industry. And exactly... that's actually always really positive feedback”(Respondent 5), some stated that scepticism towards working on Instagram came up especially from the parental generation: “For example, there is the generation of my parents. They can't necessarily relate to it that much. Everything that they said was like: 5000 followers? Okay, cool. And after a week it was no longer an issue” (Respondent 8).

This indicates some sort of generational conflict with regards to social media, however all of respondents made clear that they are overall being accepted for what they do online, encourage them to pursue their passion for content creation on Instagram.

4.4.3 Downsides of Instagram/ social media

And while Instagram makes it easy for users to present themselves in creative and authentic ways, the network also asks for a lot in return. The respondents described the fact that one is constantly available and connected, the sense of pressure to perform and the need to always be perfect as the downside of Instagram:

Uhm, I think in comparison to my circle of friends, you also simply notice this pressure that is there, that is not there for my friends who are just not active in the industry. The: You always have to be up to date, you always have to be interesting, you always have to look good (Respondent 10).

Furthermore, Instagram and the fashion industry have been described as a superficial world, in which photos are being staged and edited and influencers and other celebrities seem to live the perfect and desirable life, having the latest piece of clothing and presenting their impeccable bodies (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015). These presentations of perfection often lead to comparing one's self to others, as Respondent 6 states: "I think social media, first of all, just leads to a lot of comparison and I think that can quickly lead to devaluing yourself as opposed to others because it's always this higher, faster, better principle".

To sum up these findings, the construction of identity on Instagram can be rewarding and is largely shaped by the influence of the online community. Nonetheless, on a platform where self-presentation is on the agenda, comparison and self-doubt are not far, even if these content creators are usually that ones that others look up to for inspiration.

4.5 Instagram as a gate opener – Presentation of self as a rewarding hobby

Initially, it was assumed that bloggers on Instagram would consider themselves as entrepreneurs. Surprisingly, only one of the respondents considered herself an entrepreneur because of her activity on Instagram. Even the only respondent stating that being an influencer was her main occupation did not identify as an entrepreneur. In fact, only two more respondents considered themselves entrepreneurs, but with their occupation outside of Instagram. The respondents had clear depictions of the character traits an entrepreneur usually holds (e.g. determination, perseverance, creativity, passion) as well as the skills needed (e.g. organization skills, structure). And while some of the respondents share these character traits and skills, influencers in general were not necessarily considered entrepreneurs, since their activity was not deemed innovative enough, like Respondent 4 states: "So I think now, to still call yourself an entrepreneur because you have the idea of creating content for other companies is maybe not that progressive".

Despite that, the respondents considered entrepreneurship to be a creative outlet and a space for self-actualization. The three respondents identifying as an entrepreneur furthermore stated that work does not feel like work anymore, it rather feels like a hobby and as a form of self-actualization (Titton, 2015).

4.5.1 Working on Instagram as a reward

Nonetheless, presenting themselves on Instagram holds ready many advantages for the respondents to this study. Although most considered Instagram their hobby or a second mainstay, paid partnerships with brands promise monetary benefits or at least free products. Even more important in the eyes of the respondents are the opportunities and privileges arising from their activity on the platform. The majority of respondents indicated that to them, Instagram was a gate opener into the world of fashion. The industry, often considered elitist and hard to access, has been revolutionized by bloggers and subsequently Instagram, which is also recognizable in the data resulting from the interviews. Some respondents stated that they now work in the fashion industry, two of them due to their experience as a fashion blogger on Instagram. However, respondents not working in a fashion related job considered Instagram a creative outlet and space for self-actualization, especially with regards to presenting their sense of fashion, giving them the opportunity to participate in the overall fashion discourse.

Moreover, it has been stated that Instagram is not only a gate opener into the fashion world, but also beneficial for a job entry in the digital and social marketing world since the feed is working as a business card and shows expertise in the area. Additionally, Respondent 1, who founded her own label considered Instagram and her community a multiplier and mouthpiece for her own business: “Yes. I definitely see it as a catalyst or a multiplier. I see it as a mouthpiece. I have a mouthpiece and I reach people and the people I reach, they are very very loyal to me.”

The respondents also described how Instagram is a flexible working model that allows for a successful second mainstay next to the respondent’s main occupation. However, this also entails the blurred lines between private and professional use of Instagram as well as the respondents agreeing on spending “too much” time on Instagram, which the majority admitted seemingly uneasy and “ashamed”: “Too much! (laughs) Yes, so I would say that private and professional time are no longer recognizable for me, because everything I do for fun is actually also for work” (Respondent 10).

4.5.2 Future on Instagram

Interestingly, several respondents expressed scepticism and uncertainty towards a future on Instagram, amongst them Respondent 3:

That is also too uncertain for me. I need more security in my life. I also want to start a family someday and whatever else. And if I knew now, I'd only be on this platform and dependent on that platform. You never know how the app is going to evolve and you're

dependent on an online platform. And if your account gets hacked or I don't know, it can be over overnight.

For this reason, most of them referred to their current main occupation as their future plan, however also considered to continue creating content as long as it sparks joy in them. Even the one respondent recognizing content creation her main occupation (Respondent 2) admitted that she is going to enroll in a Master's degree to make sure she has a backup plan in case she is not successful on Instagram anymore. This can also be closely linked to the downsides of entrepreneurship or broadly speaking self-employment as articulated by the respondents (including financial risks, high responsibility also towards employees, and in most cases the absence of long-term planning).

Furthermore, as discussed above with regards to TikTok, several respondents hypothesized that it is too late to start an Instagram career now, rather suggesting that the new icons on the app will come from different segments within the entertainment industry: "I think people are more likely to come to Instagram via other segments. So for example it's Germany's Next Topmodel, where everyone goes out with thousands of followers..." (Respondent 10).

Concluding these findings, working as a content creator/influencer on Instagram did not equal entrepreneurship for the vast majority of respondent to this research. Still, working on the platform can hold ready a successful career outside of one's own account, as a self-employed or as an employee. At the same time, Instagram bears some unforeseeable risks for a career in the future, hence why most of the respondents already thought about backup plans.

5. Discussion

The previous chapter concerned the findings of this research regarding identity work and fashion influencers on Instagram. So then, what do these results reveal with respect to the role identity work plays for fashion influencers becoming more successful entrepreneurs? And consequently, how can they be evaluated?

From the qualitative analysis of the data gathered in the in-depth interviews, some general findings and four core ideas have emerged: 1) The relevance of authenticity for self-presentation and identity construction on Instagram, as well as 2) the way in which identity can be formed by means of storytelling and positioning, followed by 3) the role of others when identity is constructed online and concluded with 4) the finding that Instagram was not considered the main occupation to most of the respondents, yet however serves multiple other functions.

In this chapter, these main results will be evaluated and their relation to previous academic literature which has been highlighted in chapter two will be discussed. Furthermore, the limitations of this study will be considered and ideas and suggestions for further research will be given.

Authenticity is the key?

During the research process and the analysis of the data collected from the in-depth interviews, the first key finding that became apparent was that for the respondents to this study, strengthening their own identity through self-actualization on Instagram was of major significance. Initially, it was assumed that fashion influencers would have to adapt their identity in order to be successful and be liked by their followers. It has however turned out, that the opposite – maintaining the identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) - is (to the largest extent) the case. To stay as authentic and approachable as possible was the intention of many, which concerned both the presentation of fashionable outfits as well as the person behind the account. The influencers that have shared their experiences in the interviews stated that they aim to be true to their selves, especially since almost every niche on Instagram is occupied anyways, so they might as well be their true selves and connect with people because of their authentic personality or style.

Yet, it soon emerged that the adaptation of identity in order to fit in as proposed in identity work theories (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018) took place albeit the intention to be authentic. When it comes to following trends regarding fashion or social media trends, most respondents stated that they feel the need to follow these trends to stay relevant.

They however also stated that following such trends would only go up to a certain extent, because staying true to their own style was of more importance. These claims must be assessed critically though. It can be assumed that the respondents wanted to put themselves into the right perspective during the interview in order to appear as “real” and authentic as possible – in the end, (one of) their business(es) is to present fashion on Instagram and be an inspiration to many. Jumping on the trend bandwagon is only a logical result of their occupation and playing roles to a certain extent to stay relevant probably one of the compromises that must be made.

The adaptation of identity furthermore happened for some in an offline context, where the respective respondents have felt the need before to hide their occupation as a blogger to not attract negative attention. Although most respondents stated that they were accepted for what they do, they at the same time stated admitted their profession is still not very common, especially amongst the parental generation. As a result, some of the respondents explicitly adapt their “influencer identity” in such situations to suit societal standards and to please the people surrounding them.

To put it together, the respondents to this study maintain their identity by intending to be as authentic and approachable as possible with regards to outfit presentations and other more superficial topics. Yet, the respondents to this study also adapt their identities when it comes to following trends to stay relevant or when playing certain roles in an offline context.

Telling a story on Instagram

In the context of Instagram though, the respondents rather formed than shaped their identity. This was especially apparent when it came to omitting certain aspects of identity by simply not speaking about them on Instagram, such as political or societal discourses they were usually taking part in yet decided not to make them a subject of discussion on their Instagram account. This was the case for several reasons, and while some said they were not on topic enough to discuss these issues, two respondents clearly stated that they do not post about such things as they do not want to become a target for their opinion and fear a shitstorm or at least negative feedback, like Respondent 3 explains: “But it's really very, very difficult, because these are topics where everyone is never of the same opinion and you can never please everyone”.

Posting “shallow” content like daily outfits or clothing hauls does not make one as vulnerable as stating one’s political opinion does. And even if this position will be debatable,

it is a position to take on and thus contributes to the image the respective content creator presents.

Besides that, respondents have also admitted that they decided not to share any particularly private content concerning their families or relationships. While the first omission of identity regarding problematic topics can clearly be considered a form of positioning, for the latter it has to be acknowledged that not sharing private matters on Instagram is essentially due to the fact that the respective creator does not want to expose friends and family in a context they do not choose to be in themselves.

In like manner, the forming of identity can also be observed in the ways in which the respondents in question explicitly and carefully decided what to wear and what to post in favor of the aesthetics of their feed and the image of themselves they want to convey on Instagram. Also, five respondents stated that they conscientiously choose which brands to partner up with. Of course, certain brands convey certain images, as the influencers do. If an influencer who is active in the field of fashion is a cooperation partner of haute couture brands Gucci and Prada, their content and the person behind it will presumably be interpreted and understood differently than when they work together with athleisure wear supplier Adidas or maybe promote the clothing range of an affordable brand like, in a western European context, C&A.

On the whole, the omission of specific aspects of their identities and focusing on rather “shallow” content, as well as the careful curation of companies and products they give a stage on their account, can be seen as forming their identity in order to promote a certain image on Instagram – and to establish their brand (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Khamis et al., 2016). This forming of their identity however does not mean that their presentation of self through storytelling lacks authenticity.

Constructing identity in relation to others

For the respondents, connecting and building a relationship with their followers was an essential value. It has not been revealed in the interviews and thus needs to be discussed to what extent this intention is only due to enjoyment of exchange with others or if growing a community and working on a high engagement rate are intended for business reasons. As established before, trust in the influencer likelier leads the users to follow product recommendations, hence why authenticity and trustworthiness are of high relevance especially for business partnerships on Instagram.

Consequently, interviewees stressed the importance of an engaged community for an influencer, considering that without their engagement on the platform the influencer would not be able to make a lucrative business out of content creation. Furthermore, it has been found that followers also contribute to the forming of identity of a content creator by providing feedback and engaging with the creator. Respondents stated that feedback was of high importance to them. It can be assumed that this is for several reasons. Firstly, positive feedback was deemed to contribute to the self-confidence of the respondents and as a confirmation that how they present themselves was acceptable and even more important – likeable. Constructive criticism was furthermore conceived as a positive asset of exchange, since content creators are not infallible and a heads up to obvious misconceptions was judged as helpful. Nonetheless, most of the respondents claimed to not deeply care about the likes and the positive reassurance and that they will continue to post their authentic self-actualization on Instagram. These claims must also be assessed critically. It can again be assumed that the respondents wanted to put themselves into the right perspective during the interview in order to appear as authentic and “real” as possible – while in the end, engagement rates are what counts if Instagram is supposed to be a second mainstay or at least a lucrative hobby.

Instagram as a gate opener

Already during the interviews, it appeared that only one respondent considered herself an entrepreneur with what she does on Instagram, even though it not being her main occupation, and another one not considering herself an entrepreneur albeit Instagram being her main occupation. Except for this one respondent, the others did not consider Instagram their main occupation and did not plan to pursue this as their main career in the future, albeit having built communities and most of them engaged in several brand partnerships.

Nonetheless, Instagram, even as a hobby or second mainstay, was lucrative for most of the respondents. It was interesting to see however, that it was not simply the monetary compensation for their work or the free products that they would get that was most striking as a reward for creating content on Instagram. It was more the fact that six out of ten respondents said that they considered Instagram as a gate opener into the fashion world, a world that would have not been easy to access, if at all - would it not have been for their presence on Instagram. Not only are they part of the (global) fashion discourse in sharing outfits and interpreting trends in their own way (see Rocamora, 2012), but some respondents even stated that because of them being a fashion influencer, they landed jobs within the fashion industry

they probably would not have landed if it were not for Instagram. Furthermore, as some said, being a content creator on Instagram impacted their choice for a professional career or academic education within the online/social media marketing industry.

Moreover, it has been said that Instagram works more or less as a business card in these industries. Presenting oneself in a stylish and fashionable way, creating high-quality content or adequately using the tools that Instagram provides (e.g. stories, reels, IGTV, guides) will shed a positive light on the person behind the account and will, at least based on what the experiences of some of the respondents are, impress future employers looking out for experts from within the content creation industry.

Nevertheless, one aspect of working on Instagram should not be neglected: the time one needs to invest to be successful on the app. Community management takes up a lot of time if done correctly, and if a content creator does not create said content constantly, users will probably begin to question why they follow them. So, aspiring a career on Instagram means working on a platform that never sleeps and that is ever-changing and asks for constant time investment.

Overall, even if the respondents to this study did to the largest extent not equal being a content creator/ influencer with entrepreneurship, it cannot be dismissed that Instagram secured them success in the professional world in many other ways. Yet, the network is asking for continual commitment, and other “sacrifices” in order to stay relevant.

What was surprising?

Surprisingly, out of the ten respondents, only one identified as an entrepreneur with her occupation as an influencer. Although Respondent 1 and Respondent 10 also identified as entrepreneurs, they did so only because of their main occupation outside of Instagram and the founding of their own companies. Some argued that to them, entrepreneurship had to do something with innovation and as they were not the first people to use Instagram for these reasons, they did not consider themselves entrepreneurs.

The interviewees deemed the future of and thus their future on Instagram to be uncertain, with those insecurities based on being dependent on the continued existence of Instagram or the possibility of someone hacking their account and them losing access to it. Based thereon, it has been mentioned by multiple respondents that they speculate and expect TikTok to be “the next big thing”. They furthermore suggested that people wanting to start a career on social media should much rather begin to do so on TikTok than on Instagram. What is the most striking here is that although the respondents are currently successful on the app with

either a large existing audience or growing such an audience, they are fully aware that Instagram might potentially only be a trend and nothing they can build a permanent career on.

Lastly it was rather unexpected that the respondents admitted comparing themselves to others on Instagram. Although that is presumably a human characteristic, they are the ones with a large followership who support them and appreciate them for what they do. That these influencers in return also struggled with insecurities was a surprise to some extent.

However overall, although the respondents all stated to enjoy their job/hobby and see it as an expression of their creativity and their passions, it has to be acknowledged that all of them also found critical words for the oftentimes superficial world that is Instagram and the fashion industry, and that it can be more appearance than substance at the end of the day.

How can these findings be referenced back to current literature?

After having evaluated these main findings of the underlying research, the remaining part of this chapter will focus on what has been learned about identity work and the process of fashion blogging on Instagram with regards to similarities and differences to current literature as established in the theoretical framework in chapter 2.

What can we learn about identity work?

“The concept *identity work* refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1165).

When taking this definition of identity work into consideration, it becomes clear that the respondents to this study made use of the maintaining and strengthening aspects of identity work. As has been illustrated in chapter four, the respondents attached high importance to an authentic and approachable self-presentation of Instagram. Moreover, the majority made clear that sticking true to themselves was more essential to them than to follow every new trend in order to please people. However, an adaptation of identity can be observed with regards to following trends to stay relevant or when playing roles in offline contexts to hide their blogger personality.

Identity as a fashion influencer is constructed in multiple ways, one being the authentic, creative and truthful self-presentation of self and of one’s own fashion sense, another being the forming of identity by certain strategies such as storytelling and positioning in order to become a brand and also to stay relevant on Instagram. Storytelling has been said to be of high importance for distinctiveness, credibility, as well as trust and loyalty (Herskovitz &

Crystal, 2010; Lund et al., 2018; Salenbacher, 2016) from the community. In the case of the respondents to this study, it has to be acknowledged that the focus laid more on the stories that are not told, than the stories that are told. A fashionable persona (Titton, 2015) is doubtlessly highly personal and maybe also distinctive, but what makes creators' content even more distinctive is the revelation of their personality. According to Respondent 4, she was fully aware that sharing personal insights was necessary to become successful yet decided not to go that way: "If you... say: No, I really only want to show this and not so much of my personality, then it won't work in the long run".

Furthermore, researchers commonly agree upon that identity is constructed through interactions with others in social settings (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Watson, 2008). These observations have also been made with regards to the fashion influencers in this current study, who valued their online community and were (at least to some extent) impacted by feedback of others and trends set by others. During the interviews it has been mentioned multiple times that followers play a significant role for the success of content creators, presumably not only because of the exchange with others, but especially because without their engagement on the platform, brands would not be interested in working together with said influencer.

The current research can thus contribute to previous literature on identity work by a) adding the aspect of fashion influencers on Instagram to the discourse about identity work and b) by showing that both authenticity as well as forming and adapting identity (Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) are relevant for success for content creators on Instagram.

What can we learn about fashion bloggers?

The research has shown that the content creators responding to this research do their "job" on Instagram to live out their passion for fashion. While literature on the topic focuses more on the commercial side of Instagram influencers (Marwick, 2013), the participants to this research have shown that to them, money is not the main motivation.

This observation goes in line with research done on creative workers, who often times do not see profitability as the main motivation for their creative work (Bhansing et al., 2017). Although most of the respondents to this research considered the monetary benefits from Instagram as "nice to have", like Respondent 4 states: "So of course it's always nice when a little money is involved..." – only one of them was dependent on the money she made with content creation. What characterized them more was the intrinsic motivation for self-actualization, self-expression and self-presentation as held by people with creative identities (Langen, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2018; Walzer, 2018; Werthes et al., 2018).

In the context of bloggers on Instagram, self-presentation is a daily business (Khamis et al., 2016) – not only as they have to establish their own brand for recognition purposes and to build trust amongst their community (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010), but also since uploading photographs and videos to feed posts and stories is their main way of communication. Contrary to blogposts, which let their users communicate via written text to the largest extent (Findlay, 2015), Instagram is a visual network that requires an actual visual representation of bloggers. These visual representations however can easily lead to comparison between people, especially with regards to body types and the need to be perfect in their appearance. Something many of the respondents mentioned that has not been examined in the theoretical framework is the impact of social media on mental health. The sensed need to be perfect and the feeling of having to perform all the time are insecurities that content creators likewise struggle with, even if they are presumably the ones that other users look up to for inspiration. This aspirational “glam” life (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015) that a lot of celebrities and influencers portray on Instagram, including perfect bodies and luxurious fashion and travel, can be assumed to have an impact on “smaller” bloggers as well. With regards to this and on a more critical note, the portrayal of this lifestyle might often times be staged, as the case of Ellie Delphine⁶ (@slipintostyle) shows: In one of her Instagram stories she revealed that many of the designer clothes that she wears in her Instagram posts are actually PR samples that are send back to the designers after creating content – however the photographs make it seem as if she was fully able to afford these costly pieces, although she admitted that she could not. Although this was a slight excursion, the topic of such storytelling that seems authentic but in fact is not could be of interest for further research.

Success as an influencer is not always defined by the monetary compensation for their work, it could also be defined as the value that self-actualization (Titton, 2015) or exchange with likeminded people on the platform has. Furthermore, in the case of this sample, being a content creator on Instagram held multiple advantages ready for their career outside of Instagram.

The current research can this contribute to previous literature on fashion bloggers by a) adding the point of view that not all fashion influencers aim to make Instagram their main occupation but still rather see it as their (lucrative) hobby, b) that Instagram is seen as a stage on which content creators can express their creativity and passion, in this case for fashion, and c) by indicating that influencers likewise struggle with comparing themselves to others on Instagram, although they might actually be the ones others look up to. However, the latter

⁶ Please see Appendix F for further information.

observation was just made on the side and would require further research to prove its reliability and meaningfulness.

Limitations of this study

Certainly, this research is not without limitations that need to be considered. It lies in the nature of the topic of identity work and self-presentation that talking about such an intimate and personal issue can lead the respondents to answering questions in a way that they deem socially acceptable. And even though they have been assured that they can be honest and speak freely, possible untruthful responses need to be acknowledged. Furthermore, it has to be considered that respondents possibly did not fully understand questions or specific terms. An example for this is “entrepreneurship” – to many of the respondents this term was connected to innovation, hence why they did not consider themselves entrepreneurs as they deemed their occupation not innovative enough. Presumably, if they had had a broader understanding of entrepreneurship, the responses would have been different and an identification as an entrepreneur would have been the case.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that although the respondents met the criteria established in the sampling process, the sample did only include one respondent who considered herself to be a full-time influencer and the work on Instagram as her main financial income, it has to be considered that especially with regards to fashion influencers identifying as entrepreneurs, more influencers with a larger community and possible founded companies resulting of their online activity should have been included in this research. However, after reaching out to multiple agencies representing the “big” influencers, it became apparent that the majority was incapable of attending a small-scale research like this due to too many other obligations.

Additionally, this research could have been conducted on an international scale since the phenomenon of social media and influencers is a global one. Restricting the research to one country only was feasible for the scope and time limitations of this research, however it also limits the diversity of experiences with the topic under study.

Finally, I as a researcher am aware of the effect my own position and background can have on the interpretations of the data, however I made sure that the analytic process was well structured and the same criteria of coding were applied to each interview.

Future research

Generally speaking, further qualitative research on this topic could be conducted with a team of researchers to ensure effective and less biased interpretation of the data results as well as an even more thorough analysis of the data collected.

To further explore the relevance of identity work for fashion bloggers with regards to entrepreneurship, it seems necessary to investigate how these perceptions differ between nano-, micro, macro-, mega- or celebrity bloggers.

One of the key findings was that being an influencer on Instagram works as a gate opener into the professional (fashion world). It should thus be further examined whether this prospect is a motivation for individuals to present themselves on Instagram.

Furthermore, most of the respondents claimed that they did not need to earn money with their occupation on Instagram since it was only a hobby or their second mainstay, it would be interesting to see whether a need to earn money with blogging influences their strategies, especially with regards to (authentic) brand partnerships.

Since the majority of respondents to this study did not identify as entrepreneurs, the identity struggles as established in chapter 2 found no further application in the current research – an aspect that could be studied in future research when the sample consists of bloggers who identify as entrepreneurs.

Future research should also focus on the extent to which identity work is used amongst influencers in other segments of Instagram, such as personal fitness, interior (showing one's own home) or family related content.

No less important would be to conduct further research in an international scope. The subject of this current issue is not only highly relevant because of its topicality, but also because fashion influencers as a phenomenon can be observed around the world. Not only does social media connect people with each other - so does fashion. It would thus be suitable to examine the impact of cultural or societal issues in relation to identity work amongst fashion influencers on social media on an international scale. Looking even further, it would be interesting to see to what extent culture or language impacts the identity construction on social media, and to what extent that has an impact on the fashionable self-presentation. Aiming for further studies in this direction would allow to draw comparisons between different ethnical groups and contribute to this current research with regards to its international relevance.

Discussing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the research process

The interviews for this research were conducted in April and May in 2021, a time when cases of Covid-19 in Germany reached one of the peaks but then began to decrease, as the vaccination progress accelerated. Overall, to conduct a study in spring 2021 was presumably less stressful and trying than it would have been a year ago, since people and as such the respondents were most likely used to the new situation already. Regarding the actual interviews, it was an advantage that all of the respondents were used to doing video calls and conferences in a “business” related context, hence why it was not a big deal for them to have the conversation via Zoom. Moreover, the communication via video call still has many more benefits than a simple phone call would have had, since facial expressions (which might indicate how the respondent feels towards the situation) can be acknowledged in a video call. Of course, an in-person meeting would have had interpersonal advantages, however I had the impression that scheduling a video call was associated with less effort than an actual in person meeting, thus increasing the chances of finding respondents in the first place. Additionally, a video call gave the respondents the opportunity to participate in the interview from their own home and in their familiar surroundings, presumably reducing possible tensions.

Overall, I was under the impression that, from what the respondents shared with me, the Covid-19 pandemic did not have any serious effects on the respondents, at least not more as on others – especially since their work on Instagram could easily continue online, even in times of a national lockdown. However, what the respondents did say was that their content lacked creativity and variety since they were not able to shoot with professionals, go out and create content in different situations (no variety in photo backgrounds, no traveling) and simply had to create content at home.

Consequently, I assume that having a face-to-face conversation with the respondents to this study could have had advantages, but considering the overall situation, technology made it possible to conduct an adequate research, even in times of a global pandemic.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to explore to what extent fashion influencers on Instagram make use of identity work in order to become more successful entrepreneurs.

To answer the research question and guarantee an in-depth interpretation of the data gathered, 10 interviews with German fashion content creators have been conducted. The interview respondents have been sampled according to certain criteria to ensure they would have personal experience and knowledge in the field and enable a detailed investigation of the phenomenon under study.

The theoretical framework of this research builds on the concept of identity work (Brown, 2015, 2017; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Oliver, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Winkler, 2018) and the current understanding of fashion bloggers (as entrepreneurs) (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2019; Marwick, 2013; Rocamora, 2018; Tilton, 2015). This framework led to a more structured approach in both constructing the interview questions and consequently the data analysis process. Said data analysis process brought forward some more general findings regarding the professional and academical backgrounds of the respondent and the role of Instagram, as well as four core themes that will answer the research question.

The underlying research question: *To what extent do fashion influencers on Instagram make use of identity work in order to become more successful entrepreneurs?* can be answered in four steps:

First, fashion influencers or content creators maintain or even strengthen their identity by intending to be as authentic and approachable as possible with regards to their outfit presentations and the surrounding topics that they choose to present on Instagram. Yet, the respondents to this study also adapt their identities, for example when it comes to following trends in order to stay relevant or when it comes to playing certain roles in an offline context.

Secondly, forming their identities takes place in multiple occasions, especially when it comes to the process of self-branding. Storytelling regarding fashion and their everyday life among the respondents is presumably authentic, however due to their decision to leave out problematic issues or private details, they omit certain aspects of their identity to protect themselves from negative reactions as well as their friends and families from being put on public display.

Thirdly, it has been established that the construction of identity and the creation of a personal brand in a social network are grounded on the feedback and engagement with the community, thus making others highly relevant for one's own identity construction.

Lastly, it has been found that the respondents almost exclusively did not consider themselves entrepreneurs, hence why the usage of identity work in this context did not necessarily lead them to becoming more successful entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, their activity on Instagram has led them to other success – job offerings, “access” into the world of fashion, rewarding exchange with others and self-actualization and self-expression of their passion on the platform.

To conclude, it can be said that the respondents to this research, who either call themselves fashion influencers or content creators, make a significant use of identity work in order to become successful on Instagram.

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Appendix A: Overview Interview Respondents

Respondent 1: Victoria (female, 30)

Victoria has an academic background in tourism and business and maintains her personal Instagram account with 11.4 k followers. After growing her online community, she decided to pursue a dream of hers in 2019: creating her own fashion label and becoming an entrepreneur.

Respondent 2: Lea (female, 24)

Lea has a professional and academic background in social media marketing while at the same time growing her Instagram community to 80,2 k followers. She is currently working as a fulltime influencer on the platform, but aims to eventually work fulltime in marketing again, with Instagram being second mainstay.

Respondent 3: Sandra (female, 29)

Sandra has been working in online marketing for fashion and lifestyle companies after graduating from her bachelor's in business psychology. In 2016 she started blogging and eventually also grew her community on Instagram to now 76,2 k.

Respondent 4: Karla (female, 25)

As an expert in Influencer and Social Media Marketing and with her own Instagram account that concentrates on outfit posts and an aesthetic lifestyle, Karla shared insights from both sides of the business. Although having paid partnerships with fashion and beauty brands, Karla does not consider herself an influencer or entrepreneur – she rather treats Instagram as a lucrative hobby.

Respondent 5: Alexia (female, 26)

Alexia's community on Instagram has 19k members. She posts mostly fashion related content, but since she and her husband are currently renovating a house, Alexia also shares this progress and interior inspiration. Alexia works in social media marketing fulltime and stated that her side career as an influencer on Instagram was helpful for her career in marketing.

Respondent 6: Mona (female, 25)

Mona has recently started her PhD in Psychology, but she likes to seek creative compensation on her Instagram account. Mona is the only respondent of this research who is focusing on fair fashion and while she is still in the early stages of her Instagram career (1,4 k), and does not consider herself an influencer, she aims to grow her community by linking her passion for fashion with her other main interest: sustainability.

Respondent 7: Jessica (female, 26)

When I interviewed Jessica, she was also working on her Master's Thesis in Business. She has been active on Instagram since 2015 and now engages a community of 22,5 k members.

Jessica focuses on fashion content, creating reels and daily outfit inspirations, but also invites her followers to join her everyday life in her stories.

Respondent 8: Laura (female, 26)

As a business student who has been working in fashion and social media for the past years, Laura knows her way round Instagram and has decided to grow her community herself. She currently has 5k followers and is now being offered paid partnerships which she has not yet accepted but plans to do so if the right companies get in touch.

Respondent 9: Helen (female, 24)

Although she comes from a textile management related background, Helen has decided to enter a career as a flight attendant. However, her passion for fashion is still vivid and she acts that out on her Instagram account, where she posts both outfit and travel content. With currently 1,5 k followers she is also in an early stage of her Instagram career but has already received requests for brand partnerships.

Respondent 10: Nora (female, 23)

Nora used the knowledge of being an influencer on Instagram herself for a few years (10,6 k) by founding her own influencer management and social media agency. She was thus able to share insights from both her personal experience as well as from a brand's perspective.

Appendix B: Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Franziska Laabs, 577657fl@eur.nl, +491785362322

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about *Fashion Bloggers on Instagram and Entrepreneurship*. The purpose of the study is to understand the entrepreneurial strategies, routines and personal experiences of fashion bloggers on Instagram. The questions in the interview will be related to your working routine, experience with your field of work, strategies you established or challenges you have encountered.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use the Zoom recording function for the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your first name or other identifying information [such as your company's name] in the study. If you agree, I will simply be using general identification, meaning only your first name, age and gender. I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45-60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you wish, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Dr. Sven-Ove Horst, Email: horst@eshcc.eur.nl.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

| Name | Signature | Date |
|------|-----------|------|
|------|-----------|------|

I agree that my identity is revealed by means of revealing my first name, age and gender in all written data resulting from this study:

| Name | Signature | Date |
|------|-----------|------|
|------|-----------|------|

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix C: Topic List

Topic 1: Entrepreneurship

Topic 2: Entrepreneurship as a fashion blogger on social media

Topic 3: Relationship to Followers

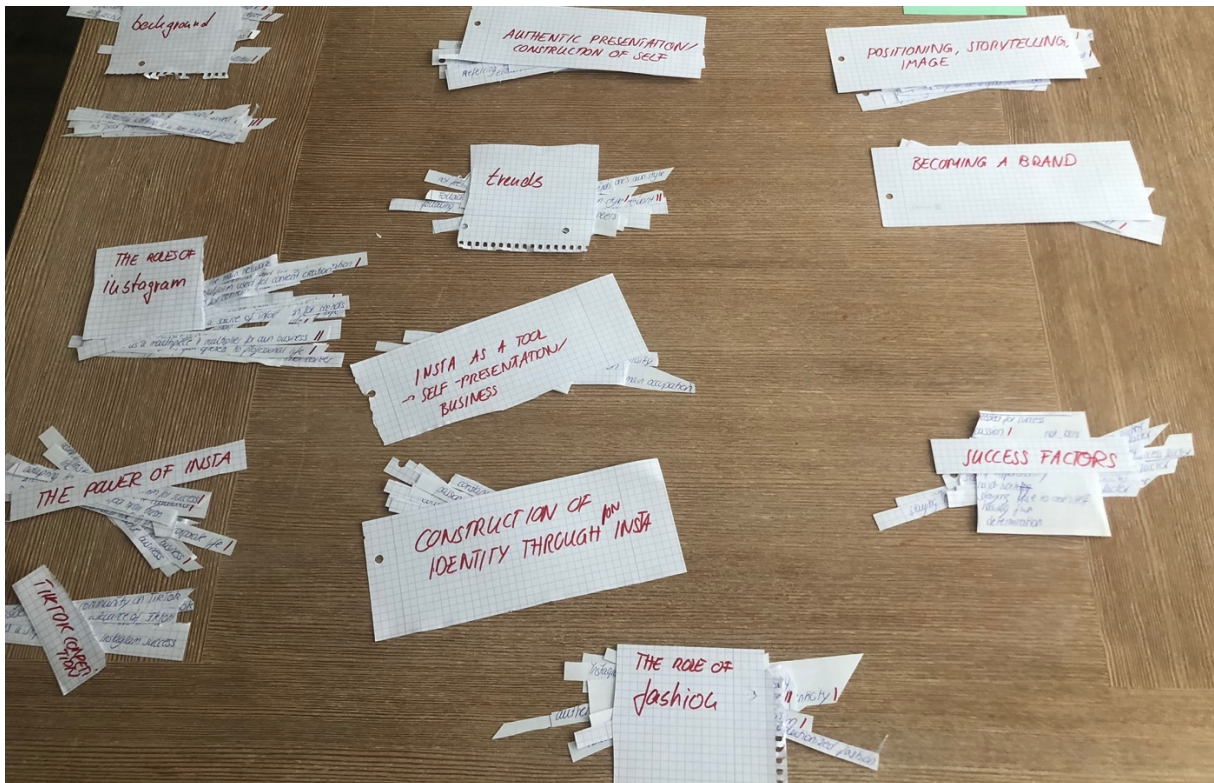
Topic 4: Identity (as a fashion blogger)

Topic 5: Identity Work (as a fashion blogger)

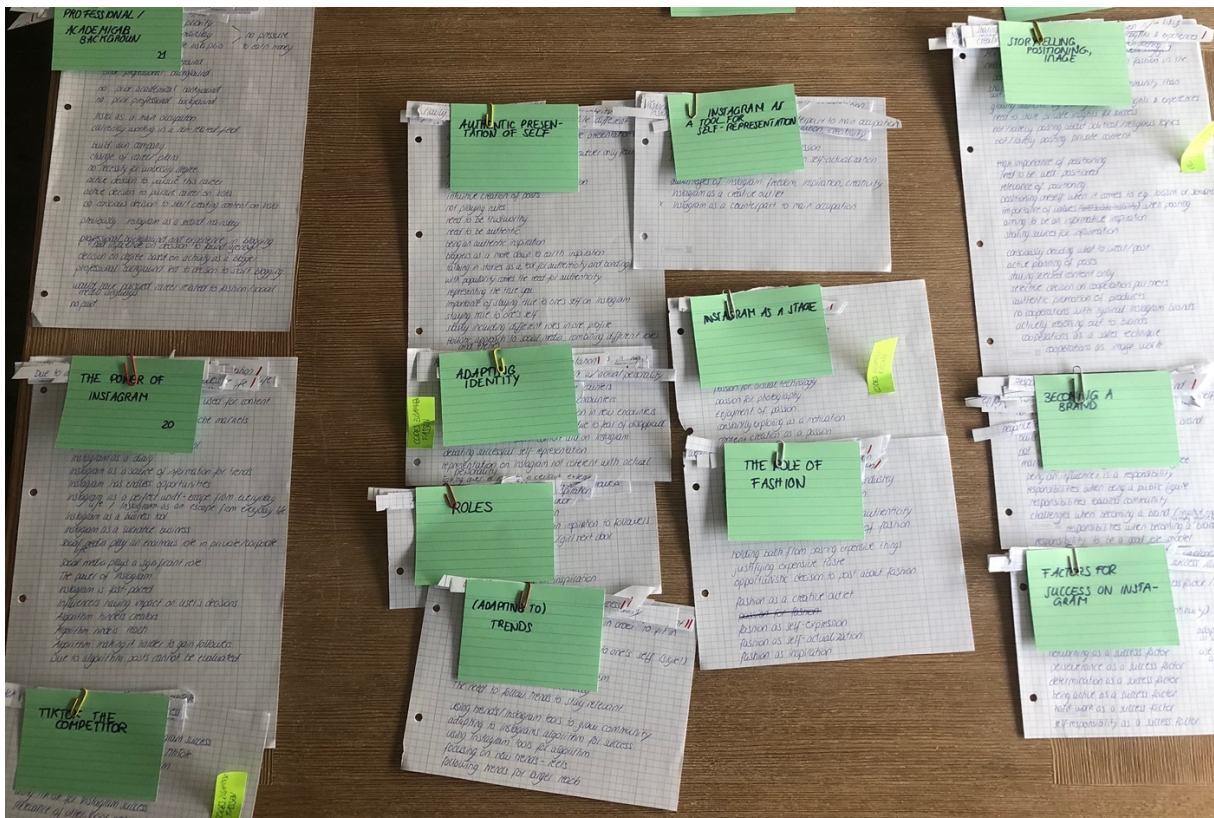
Topic 6: Storytelling

Topic 7: Conditions in fashion blogging

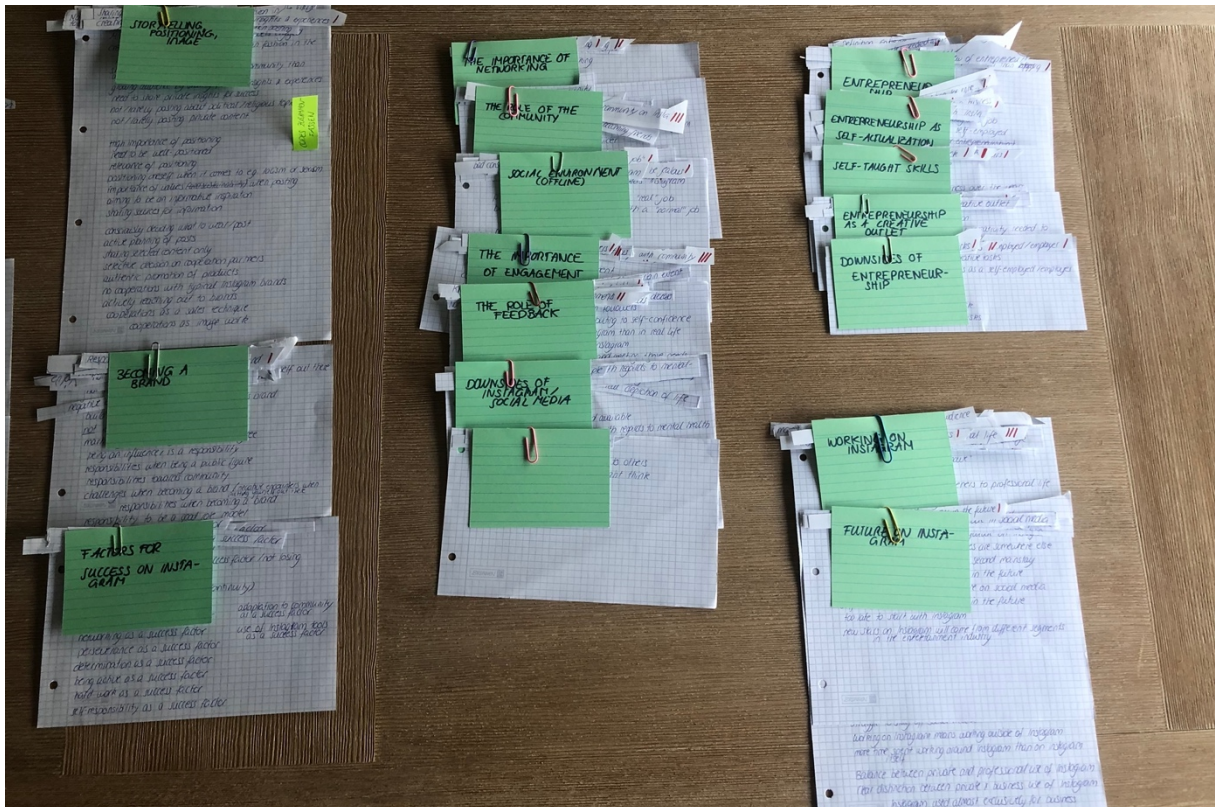
Appendix D: Visual Documentation Coding Process



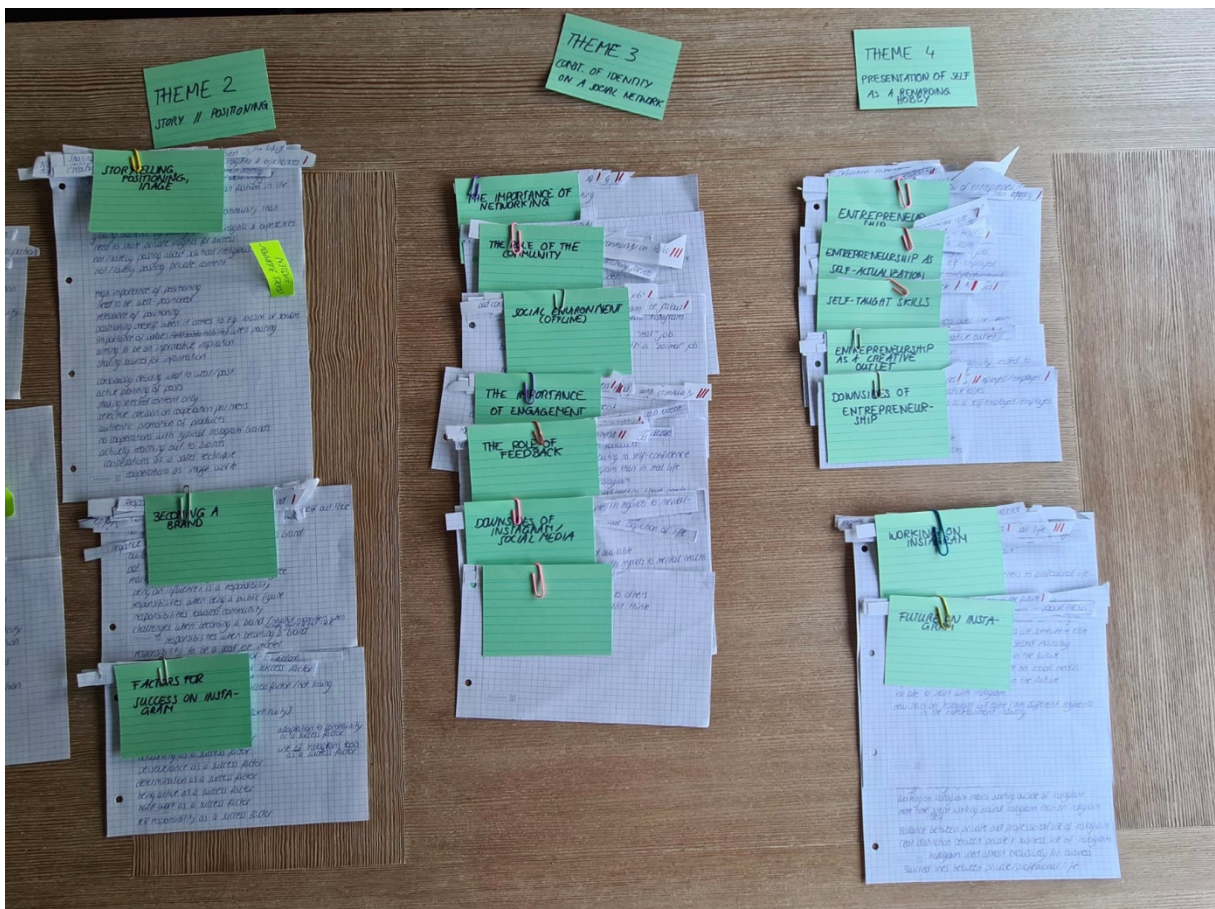
Axial coding Part 1: Beginning to group initial/open codes to categories



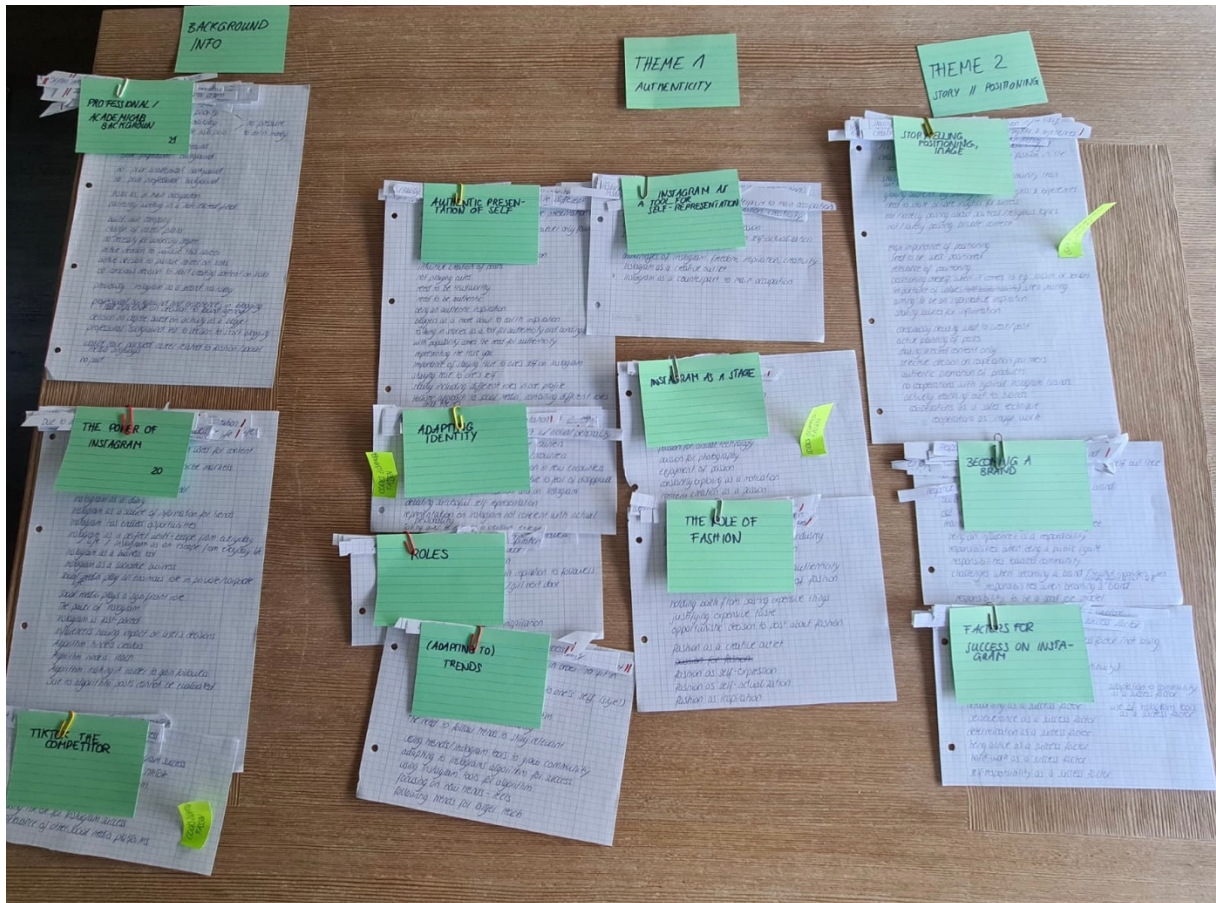
Axial Coding Part 2: Creating more categories



Axial Coding Part 2: Creating more categories



Selective Coding: Creating overarching themes



Selective Coding: Creating overarching themes

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Interview Questions English Translation

Warm up

- How would you describe your normal workday?
- How do you structure your work?
- What are you currently working on?
- Is blogging your main career?
- What is your experience with “being self-employed”?/ What is your experience with being self-employed while still being a student/mum/etc.?

Entrepreneurship

- Are you familiar with the term entrepreneurship? If so, how would you describe entrepreneurship in your own words?
- Could you describe what the concept of entrepreneurship means to you?
- What are the main characteristics of an entrepreneur in your opinion?
- In how far does that apply to you, would you consider yourself as an entrepreneur?
- How did you become an entrepreneur?
- Did you actively decide to pursue this career as a blogger?
- Did your personal/academic background affect your choice for entrepreneurship?
- Why are you doing it? What motivates and drives you to continue it?
- Could you describe which problems you encountered?
- What do you need to become a successful creative entrepreneur?

Entrepreneurship as a fashion blogger and digital (social) media

- How does digital and especially social media influence your career?/ What role does social media play for your work?
- Do you think you would have pursued a career in fashion if it weren't for Instagram?
- What are the greatest benefits of social media in your opinion?
- What are the biggest problems you encounter when working in a digital environment?
- Do you use any other social media than Instagram?
- How much time do you spend on your social media?

Relationship to followers

- Can you describe your followers? What do you know about them?
- How do you attempt to keep your followers?
- How do you attempt to attract new followers?
- How do you engage with your followers?
- Could you describe the importance of engaging with your followers?

- Do you receive feedback from your followers and can you describe its' relevance to you?
- How do you deal with this feedback, especially when it is negative?
- Does feedback of any sort influence your strategy?

Identity (as a fashion blogger)

- Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur/artist/creative worker/influencer?
- How do you experience being an “”? Could you describe that?
- How do you see yourself most of the time? (Role(s), attitude, etc.)
- In what way does this image of yourself alter in various (work) situations?
- Do you sometimes have to perform different roles? When is that the case?
- How has the image of yourself changed the last few years?
- What made you become aware that something was changing?
- Have your self-perceptions changed over the course of time since you are blogging?
- What role does fashion play in the development of your identity?
- Why did you choose to post (mostly) fashion related content on Instagram?

Identity work (as a fashion blogger)

- How do you present yourself? How successful are these presentations of yourself?
- Do you present yourself differently to your co-workers, family and friends than you do on Instagram?
- In what way does the representation of yourself change in various (work) settings?
- How do you feel about “putting yourself out there” and becoming a “brand”?
- Are there challenges when becoming a brand? How do you manage these challenges?
- What tools do you use to present yourself how you want to be perceived? (e.g. on Instagram: Music in stories, stickers, filters)
- How do trends in fashion influence the presentation of yourself?
- How do trends on Instagram influence the presentation of yourself?
- Do you ever get in a conflict with your personal style and with what you think is successful and popular on Instagram at the moment?
- Do you ever get in a conflict with what you personally think would be the most suitable to post and what you have to post in order to fulfill agreements (for example in paid partnerships)?
- What stories do you present about yourself on Instagram?
- Are there things you would want to present about yourself on Instagram but you refrain yourself from doing so because you are “afraid” of the feedback?
- In what ways is Instagram helping you with sharing your story?

Conditions in CCI and how they influence the identity construction and future

- What is the feedback that you get from others?

- Do you feel like you are not taken seriously by some clients or friends when you tell them about your work? (having a feeling that your work is not real work)
- What do you think is the role of networking in your field of work?
- How do you find partnerships with brands and how do you decide whether or not you want to work with a brand?
- How do you see your future? (as an entrepreneur, fashion blogger)
- Are there particular goals that you work towards? How do you want to reach these goals?
- What would you recommend others who want to become an Influencer?

Interview Questions German

Warm up

- Wie würdest du deinen normalen Arbeitstag beschreiben?
- Wie strukturierst du deine Arbeit?
- Woran arbeitest du gerade?
- Ist das Bloggen dein Hauptberuf?
- Wie sind deine Erfahrungen mit der Selbstständigkeit? Wie sind deine Erfahrungen mit der Selbstständigkeit während du zeitgleich noch studierst/Mutter bist/ etc.?

Entrepreneurship

- Ist dir der Begriff Entrepreneurship geläufig? Wenn ja, kannst du den Begriff in deinen eigenen Worten beschreiben?
- Kannst du beschreiben was das Konzept Entrepreneurship für dich bedeutet?
- Was sind in deinen Augen die wichtigsten Eigenschaften eines Entrepreneurs?
- Inwieweit treffen diese Eigenschaften auf dich zu, würdest du dich als Entrepreneur bezeichnen? Warum siehst du dich als Entrepreneur?
- Wie wurdest du zum Entrepreneur?
- Hast du dich aktiv dafür entschieden deine Karriere als Bloggerin auszubauen und zu verfolgen?
- Hat dich dein persönlicher oder akademischer Werdegang beeinflusst dich für eine Karriere als Entrepreneur zu entscheiden?
- Warum bist du Blogger? Was motiviert und bringt dich dazu weiterzumachen was du tust?
- Kannst du beschreiben mit welchen Schwierigkeiten oder Herausforderungen du dich bisher konfrontiert gesehen hast?
- Was braucht es/ oder was brauchst du um ein erfolgreicher Entrepreneur in der kreativen Branche zu sein?

Entrepreneurship as a fashion blogger and digital (social) media

- Inwiefern beeinflussen digitale und vor allem soziale Medien deine Karriere?/ Welche Rolle spielen soziale Medien für deine Arbeit?

- Denkst du, dass du eine Karriere in der Modeindustrie angestrebt hättest wenn es Instagram nicht geben würde?
- Was sind in deinen Augen die größten Vorteile die dir die sozialen Netzwerke bieten können?
- Was sind die größten Probleme denen du begegnest dadurch dass sich ein Großteil deiner Arbeit online abspielt? Was ist online anders?
- Benutzt du (beruflich) noch aktiv andere Plattformen als Instagram?
- Wie viel Zeit verbringst du am Tag auf Social Media?

Relationship to followers

- Kannst du deine Follower beschreiben? Was weißt du über sie?
- Wie versuchst du deine Follower zu behalten?
- Wie versuchst du neue Follower zu erreichen?
- Wie interagierst/kommunizierst du mit deinen Followern?
- Kannst du beschreiben wie wichtig die Interaktion mit deinen Followern ist?
- Erhältst du Feedback von deinen Followern? Und wenn ja, welche Relevanz hat dieses Feedback für dich?
- Wie gehst du mit diesem Feedback um, besonders wenn es negativ ist?
- Beeinflusst das Feedback deiner Follower deine Strategie?

Identity (as a fashion blogger)

- Würdest du dich selber as Entrepreneur sehen?
- Wie fühlt es sich an ein Entrepreneur etc. zu sein?
- Wie schätzt du dich selber ein, welche Rolle übernimmst du?
- Verändert sich dieses Bild von dir in bestimmten Situationen?
- Musst du manchmal in andere Rollen schlüpfen? Wann ist das der Fall?
- Wie hat sich dein Bild von dir in den letzten Jahren verändert?
- Wie ist dir aufgefallen, dass sich etwas verändert hat?
- Hat sich deine Selbstwahrnehmung im Laufe der Jahre verändert, besonders seit du bloggst?
- Welche Rolle spielt die Mode in der Entwicklung deiner Identität?
- Warum hast du dich entschieden hauptsächlich Content mit Modebezug auf Instagram zu posten?

Identity work (as a fashion blogger)

- Wie präsentierst du dich selbst? Wie erfolgreich ist diese Repräsentation von dir?
- Präsentierst du dich im privaten Umfeld anders als auf Instagram?
- Wie ändert sich die Darstellung von dir in verschiedenen (Arbeits-)Situationen?
- Wie fühlt es sich an dich "auf dem Präsentierteller zu zeigen" und eine Marke zu werden?
- Gibt es Herausforderungen wenn man selbst zur Marke wird? Wie kommst du mit diesen Herausforderungen klar?

- Welche “Werkzeuge” nutzt du um dich so zu präsentieren wie du gerne wahrgenommen werden möchtest?
- Wie beeinflussen Mode Trends deine Darstellung von dir selber?
- Wie beeinflussen Trends auf Instagram deine Darstellung von dir selber? (z.B. Bananenbrot backen weil es im ersten Lockdown alle gemacht haben, obwohl man sonst nie backen würde)
- Gerätst du manchmal in einen inneren Konflikt mit dir darüber was deinem eigenen Stil entspricht und dem was gerade auf Instagram beliebt und erfolgsversprechend ist?
- Gerätst du manchmal in einen inneren Konflikt mit dir darüber was die passende Art und Weise wäre etwas zu posten und dem wie du es posten musst um zum Beispiel einen Vertrag mit einem Kooperationspartner zu erfüllen?
- Welche Geschichten/Ansichten/Inhalte teilst du auf Instagram?
- Gibt es “Geschichten” oder Ansichten und Inhalte die du gerne teilen würdest hältst du zurück weil du Sorgen vor dem Feedback hast?
- Hat sich etwas geändert an dem was du mit Anderen teilst?

Conditions in CCI and how they influence the identity construction and future

- Wie fällt das Feedback von anderen außerhalb Instagrams zu deiner Tätigkeit aus?
- Hast du manchmal das Gefühl, dass andere dich nicht ernst nehmen aufgrund deiner Tätigkeit?
- Wie schätzt du die Rolle von Networking in deinem Berufsfeld ein?
- Wie kommt es zu Kollaborationen und Partnerschaften und wie entscheidest du welche du eingehst oder welche du ablehnst?
- Wie siehst du deine Zukunft? (als Entrepreneur, Fashion Blogger)
- Gibt es bestimmte Ziele auf die du hin arbeitest? Wie möchtest du diese Ziele erreichen?
- Was würdest du anderen raten die auch gerne Mode Blogger werden wollen?

Appendix F: Screenshots

1 TYPED « PRESS LOANS » ON GOOGLE AND THIS IS THE FIRST ARTICLE THAT CAME UP. IT'S COMPLETELY ACCURATE WITH A FEW TWEAKS

STYLISTS FOR ACTORS, SINGERS, CELEBRITIES, CONTENT CREATORS

We get approached regularly by people from newspapers and magazines asking either for images or sometimes for actual products which they borrow for **photoshoots** and then send back in return for a mention in the relevant magazine. **FOR PUBLICITY VISIBILITY**

We've often sent things out and they usually come straight back.

RED CARPETS, EVENTS, GALAS, DINNERS, CONTENT CREATION, REELS

1 FASHION WEEK

THIS WAS TAKEN DURING FASHION WEEK. THIS IS NOT MY HOME (I WISH!)

I VISITED THE SHOWROOM AND THE DESIGNER THAT DAY ALLOWED ME TO USE THE SAMPLES TO CREATE CONTENT. I SPENT TWO HOURS THERE. I SHOT PHOTOS AND A REEL AND WHEN I WAS DONE, I GAVE ALL THE PIECES BACK SO THAT SOMEBODY ELSE COULD DO THE EXACT SAME THING AS I DID.

FASHION WEEK OUTFIT!
HEAD TO TOE LOANED. ALL RETURNED WHEN FASHION WEEK WAS OVER.
I ENDED UP PURCHASING THE SKIRT ON SALE BECAUSE I LOVED IT SO MUCH.
THE SUNGLASSES HERE ARE MINE BUT SOME PRESS AGENCIES DO LOAN SUNGLASSES, JEWELRY, PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO MAKE AN OUTFIT!

2 CONTENT CREATION

LET'S TAKE MY HELLIE IN PARIS SEASON 2 SERIES. THIS GORGEOUS COUTURE DRESS? LOANED SPECIFICALLY FOR THAT EPISODE. AND ALMOST ALL THE OUTFITS FOR FILMING THE SERIES WERE LOANED OR GIFTED FOR THE OCCASION. THINK OF IT THAT WAY. WHEN YOU SEE YOUR FAVORITE ACTRESS IN YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE, YOU DON'T ASSUME THAT THE CLOTHES SHE WEARS ARE HERS RIGHT? WELL SAME FOR ME!

WHEN YOU SEE ME IN LITERALLY HEAD TO TOE DIOR, AGAIN NOT A SINGLE PIECE IS MINE. THESE CLOTHES ARE PRESS LOANS. LOANED TO CREATE CONTENT.

THIS HEAD TO TOE GUCCI LOOK? NOT MINE. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN TO ANNOUNCE THE AMAZING GUCCI ARIA COLLECTION. IT ALL WENT BACK TO THE BRAND WHEN I WAS DONE SHOOTING

3. PERSONAL PURCHASES - BIG DISCOUNTS - I'M AN AVID EBAY AND VESTIAIRE COLLECTIVE SECOND HAND SHOPPER

GIFTED

BOUGHT WITH A DISCOUNT

BOUGHT SECOND HAND YEARS AGO

ONE OF THE FEW ITEMS I BUY FULL PRICE

GIFTED

BOUGHT SECOND HAND

THIS RECENT JACQUEMUS LOOK? BOUGHT WITH A BIG DISCOUNT.

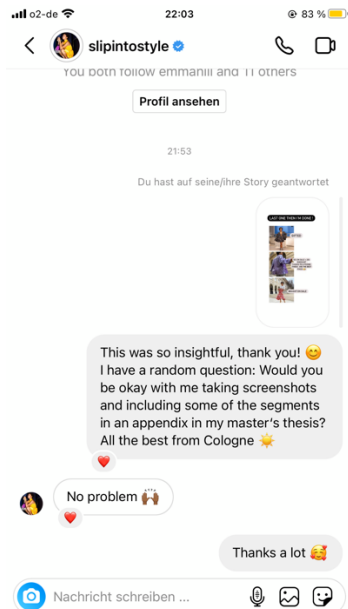
LAST ONE THEN I'M DONE!

GIFTED

BOUGHT ON SALE + 20% DISCOUNT THANKS TO A FRIEND. (THESE ARE THE BEST FINDS 🤍)

BOUGHT ON SALE

Screenshots of Ellie Delphine (@slipintostyle), who admitted that a large percentage of her designer clothes that she displays on her Instagram Account are PR samples that will be send back to the designers immediately after she has worn them. She wanted to raise awareness that not all influencers who portray this lifestyle can afford it but are rather treated as models from the brand's perspective.



Consent of Ellie Delphine (@slipintostyle) to take screenshots and use them for this paper.